

Beyond The Post-Modern: The Re-configuration of Myth in Three Contemporary Novels.

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Abstract.

In this dissertation I consider three novels: *The Satanic Verses*, *The English Patient*, and *The Ancestor Game*. These are interpreted as post-colonial texts whose issues are grounded in the social concerns of a modern world. Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje and Alex Miller, in their attempts to address these issues, perceive a need to locate themselves on the continuum between modernism and post-modernism and to allow for provisional truth claims.

This is exemplified in their writing through the treatment of myth. It is myth that typically underwrites the community, and each author suggests that myth should reflect the dynamic nature of community. Each acknowledges that in the same way post-modernism exhibits new tropes and techniques that distinguish it from modernism, so too should the customary and conventionalist models of community reflect their distinct composition through different forms of myth.

All three authors I examine challenge what I have labelled monolithic myth. This they interrogate as a destructive form of myth that appeals to those individual's confronted with the prospect of unwelcome change in their community. It is defined by its exclusiveness, intolerance, and its need to privilege the community over the individual by offering prebricated senses of identity and place. Monolithic myth flourishes, however, in conventionalist communities that are too complicated for such simple purities. Each author looked at in this dissertation recognises that a complex post-modern society, which is defined by heterogeneity, requires a more provisional myth from to shore up the community and speak to hybridised notions of identity and place. In their eyes, it is the individual who must ultimately be left to create him or herself.



Introduction.

[Myth] is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.¹

So says T.S. Eliot of myth in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Immediately his words convey to the reader a confident air of finality. Myth is a device employed for controlling, ordering and shaping art. This rests uneasily, however, with Eliot's implicit allegation that art is impossible in the 'modern world'. Even more disturbingly, 'contemporary' history, the intervening modern and post-modern period of seventy or so years since the writing of his essay, can only be seen to have deteriorated. Thomas Pynchon dryly notes in *V*:

[i]n August 1904 von Trotha issued his 'Vernichtungs Befehl', whereby the German forces were ordered to exterminate systematically every Herero man, woman and child they could find. He was about 80 per cent successful. Out of the estimated 80,000 Hereros living in the territory in 1904, an official German census taken seven years later set the Herero population at only 15,130, this being a decrease of 64,870. Similarly the Hottentots were reduced in the same period by about 10,000, the Berg-Damaras by 17,000. Allowing for natural causes during those unnatural years, von Trotha, who stayed for only one of them, is reckoned to have done away with about 60,000 people. This is only one percent of six million, but still pretty good.²

In this passage, the atrocities of the earlier years of this century are revealed as nothing more than perverse practice for the gross inhumanities to come. If the culmination of the dual forces of industrialisation and technology has been wars of unparalleled horror - wars that bequeath only 'futility' and 'anarchy' - then how, if at all, does myth order, shape and give coherence in the *postmodern* era?

An answer to this question requires that a second be asked: what is myth? There are many definitions and concepts of what a myth is, but in its broadest sense a myth might be described as: *a narrative, or drama, to which various kinds of belief can be attached which serve the purpose of connecting the individual to the larger patterns of society, and which confers meaning and continuity on the larger society.* In order to understand where the definition of myth that I have formulated

1 Eliot, Thomas. "Myth and Literary Classicism", in Ellman, Richard and Feidelson, Charles Jr. eds. *The Modern Tradition* (New York: Oxford University, 1965), p679.

2 Pynchon, Thomas. *V*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p245.

comes from, let me quickly outline its fused genealogy in a number of different theoretical approaches.

A useful point of entry is afforded by Murray Edelman's anthropological account of myth. A myth, he argues, is 'a belief ... typically socially cued rather than empirically based ... held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning'.³ The first point that Edelman makes is that myth is a belief; more specifically, that which we assume to be true. Myth's very power is 'that it lives on the feather line between fantasy and reality. It must be neither too good to be true nor too bad to be true, nor must it be too true'.⁴ For myth to maintain its purchase in the mind of a group, it must not be grounded purely in fantasy, nor in the depressing realities of daily existence. A myth must be an inspirational fusion of fact and fiction. Its particular strength is that it is fundamentally a matter of faith. It can 'give no specific reasons for what it asserts', and thus precludes 'the efforts of "intellectualist philosophy"'. Unlike a programme or a prediction, myth cannot be refuted'.⁵

It cannot be refuted because myth is in a very real sense divorced from historical 'truth'. As Roland Barthes reminds us from his structuralist perspective: 'myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all history. In it, history evaporates'.⁶ Myths are presented as natural and given truths that rely on uncritical acceptance. In Edelman's terms, they are 'socially cued rather than empirically based'. Barthes pursues this line of thought in one of his signature works, *Mythologies*.

I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn ... the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.⁷

Barthes draws our attention to the fact that myth only masquerades as a natural truth, when in reality it is artifact and therefore vulnerable to

3 Edelman, Murray. *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971), p14.

4 Bruner, Jerome. "Myth and Identity", in Murray, Henry ed. *Myth and Mythmaking* (New York: Brazillier, 1960), p279.

5 Sorel, Georges. *Reflections on Violence* (Illinois: Free Press, 1950), p52.

6 Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p129.

7 *Ibid*, p11.

ideological shaping. Thus myth is empowered to give an 'historical intention a natural justification, and make contingency appear eternal'.⁸

This knowledge is brought into sharper focus when one considers Edelman's second element in his definition of myth: that it is a belief held by a substantial number of people. Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski add a pertinent qualification to this second element. They assert that myth is, 'typically a tale concerned with past events, giving them a special meaning and significance for the present and thereby reinforcing ... a particular community'.⁹ Not only does myth give meaning to events and actions shared by significant numbers of people, it locates these events in the past. And by 'invoking a tradition of discourse that has historical roots and referents, and carrying with it a heavy and persistent ideological charge', myth 'not only links [people] with each other as "natives" of the same culture, it associates them backward in time to the earlier makers of [their] culture and ideology'.¹⁰

In review, myth can be seen as a unifying device for the disparate individuals that make up a community. It casts backward into a shared history for 'roots and referents' with which to measure and inform contemporary events. These operate as archetypes which 'express, enhance, and codify belief; safeguard and enforce morality; vouch for the efficiency of ritual, and contain practical rules for the guidance of man'.¹¹ Myth must therefore embody not simply the beliefs, but also the ideals and aspirations of a society; and the characters of myth must be the ideal representations of that society. In this sense, myth not only operates as an ordering device but also as wish fulfilment.

Myth has a persuasive agenda. It *reflects* a society's ideas and ambitions through its use of archetypes as ideal representations, but at the same time its ideological shaping *refracts* them through the authorial lens of literary traditions, customs and tropes. Myth may be a belief, but it is always told as 'a story, a narrative of events in dramatic form'.¹²

⁸ *Ibid.*, p129.

⁹ Friedrich, Carl and Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p99.

¹⁰ Slotkin, Richard. "Myth and the Production of History", in Bercovitch, Sacran and Jehlen, Myra eds. *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p78.

¹¹ Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p101.

¹² Tudor, Henry. *Political Myth* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972), p16.

In their statement that myth 'reinforces' a particular community, Friedrich and Brzezinski acknowledge that myth is told in order to promote some practical purpose. It explains the circumstances of those to whom it is addressed: it gives coherence to their experience and enables them to understand their world. Myth achieves this end by offering a role in the narrative of events; by enabling people to view their present reality as an episode in an ongoing drama. Furthermore, this drama offers transcendence from the insecurity and isolation of the self, promising to paint the individual indelibly onto a larger communal canvas. Myth explains, but it also offers a practical argument and purpose.

This persuasiveness of myth, its argument, is premised on a moral imperative. Richard Slotkin observes that myth begins by inventing a possible 'world' or 'community', but is 'never just a tale from which inferences can be drawn from the world'; rather it has 'a moral content that converts inference into a set of imperatives for human action'.¹³ This moral content is of particular importance because it forms the basis of a politics of exclusion in mythical discourse. Slotkin again:

[t]he moral imperatives implicit in the myths are given as if they were the only possible choices for moral and intelligent beings; and similarly, the set of choices confronted are limited to a few traditional either/or decisions. [In war], for example, only two or three human roles exist - aggressor, victim, avenger - and there are few options for moral choice: a man's *got* to do what a man's got to do.¹⁴

Belief in a myth is a signifier of inclusion; disbelief is a signifier of exclusion. Eric Fromm, in his influential work on group narcissism, notes that:

while the individual may have at least some doubts about his personal narcissistic image ... the member of the group has none, since his narcissism is shared by the majority. In cases of conflict, the narcissistic image of one's own group is raised to its highest point, while the devaluation of the opposing group sinks to the lowest. One's own group becomes a defender of human dignity, decency, morality and right. Devilish qualities are ascribed to the other group; it is treacherous, ruthless, cruel and basically inhuman.¹⁵

¹³ Slotkin, Richard. *Op cit*, p73.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p73.

¹⁵ Fromm, Eric. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p231.

Myth not only engenders a sense of community and purpose for the believer, it legislates for a 'natural' course of action, a 'duty', that is challenged only by the 'unenlightened'.

Myth further augments its force by appealing to individual anxieties concerning role, identity, and a sense of belonging. Community is presupposed by these very notions, which Edelman sees as 'individual anxieties and impulses which [myth] channels into a widely shared scenario to guide action'. Myth then:

frees the individual from responsibility for his unhappy or threatened place in society and prescribes a clear and widely supported program for protecting his identity.¹⁶

Myth allays anxiety by guaranteeing a role and identity, and thereafter erects ramparts against destructive criticism by delivering the individual into the castle of community.

Henry Tudor corroborates this position by stating that in myth:

the part is identified as a whole, the individual with the species [or community] to which he belongs. A nation wins a war, and the individual citizen feels enhanced, though personally he never fired a shot. In this way of reasoning, no man is a mere individual, and he embodies in himself all the attributes which others, rightly or wrongly, ascribe to that group. It is [a mistake] to suppose that this kind of reasoning obtains only in mythical thought. But it is true that, without this kind of reasoning, it becomes impossible to view the world mythically.¹⁷

Because the individual is so identified with the whole, it is important to situate him or herself within a myth-system whose ascribed attributes he or she wishes to embody.

The individual, in his or her decision to believe in a particular myth, is a primary mover in choosing a personal role and identity. Jerome Bruner explains this in psychological terms:

[i]t is not simply society that patterns itself on idealising myths, but unconsciously it is the individual man as well who is able to structure his internal clamour of identities in terms of prevailing myth. Life then produces myth and finally imitates it.¹⁸

¹⁶ Edelman, Murray. *Op cit*, p54.

¹⁷ Tudor, Henry. *Op cit*, p131.

¹⁸ Bruner, Jerome. *Op cit*, pp282-3.

There is a paradox inherent in this explanation that is of critical importance in the over-arching framework of this thesis. The paradox begins with the notion that 'life produces myth and then finally imitates it', but adds a further dimension: that the identity comes to be perceived as self-created. Consider this argument by Erik Erikson:

[b]y accepting some definition as to who he is, usually on the basis of a function in an economy, a place in the sequence of generations, and a status in the structure of society, the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step by step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned *it*. In this sense, psychologically we do choose our parents, our family history, and the history of our kings, heroes and gods.¹⁹

This quotation discloses the nature of some mythical belief. In Erikson's argument the apparent leap from the notion of myth as a device generated to explain or understand a present situation, to myth acting as a charter for individual existence, seems only a small one.

This is a transition that could be explained in terms of the *extent* of belief. Clearly, the greater the anxiety for the individual then the more attractive the security of myth will appear. Myth guarantees community and individual role, and silences the clamour of the subject's identities by offering a delimited choice within a widely supported programme. By extension, the adherent will cling more tenaciously to belief to preserve the self-esteem and security the myth-blanket provides. The unanswerable manifestation of this belief is blind obedience to the roles and duties that the myth prescribes.

In some instances, then, myth can become monolithic. That is to say, to satisfy basic human needs in increasingly complex societies which are flooded with conflicting messages, the individual is lured toward the perceived concrete and unitary values of the myth-system. Edelman asserts that:

attachment to a myth replaces gnawing uncertainty and rootlessness with a vivid account of who are friends, who are enemies, and what course of action must be taken to protect the self and significant others.²⁰

Myth is viewed in this sense as a self-sufficient construct that acts as a transcendental signifier to order and proscribe for the subject. When a group of individuals, a community, subscribe to and act on the moral

¹⁹ Erikson, Erik. *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton, 1958), p111.

²⁰ Edelman, Murray. *Op cit*, p54.

imperatives implicit in myth, the system becomes self-perpetuating. Theirs is the only Truth, theirs the only system, and a politics of exclusion swings into effect to keep out the threat of the non-believer. As Salman Rushdie puts it:

much-the-same, nothing-to-choose, give-or-take. What folly! For truth is extreme, it is *so* and not *thus*, it is *him* and not *her*; a partisan matter, not a spectator sport.²¹

In this passage by Rushdie the monolithic nature of some myth systems is stressed. These myths are extreme and partisan. They are closed, self-promulgating systems that answer individual anxiety with prefabricated feelings of communal belonging and definition, located in the we-they/us-them equation of binary oppositions.

An example of such a myth is the fundamentalist Islamic belief that Salman Rushdie examines in *The Satanic Verses*. This myth is totalising in that it fully legislates for the existence of its disciples, and, as Rushdie can vouch, ruthless with its judgement and punishment of perceived enemies. James Harrison notes that:

[t]he black and white clarity and the unequivocal certainty of Islam's stand on many issues, even in the harshness of its judgments and punishments, together with a nostalgic longing for a simpler world for which such laws are designed, combine to give fundamentalist Islam the same kind of attraction that fundamentalist Christianity has for many who are dismayed by the uncertainties and complexities of today's world.²²

The doctrine of fundamentalist Islam is a guarantor of absolute value in the world and, paradoxically, its rigidity only serves to render it more secure and attractive. The determined exclusion of doubt or difference reaffirms the monolithic structure of Islam, and sends clear signals that the religion not only conceives of itself as, but is, the one natural Truth.

Yet this totalising value of the myth structure is precisely the reason why it is challenged by Rushdie. Far from being filled with 'a nostalgic longing for a simpler world for which such laws are designed', Rushdie, at least at the time of *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, considers a complex and hybridised society as the most desirable social system. The closed system of monolithic myth and

21 Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses* (Delaware: The Consortium, 1992), p354. All further references to this edition will be contained parenthetically in the body of the text. In chapters other than that pertaining specifically to *The Satanic Verses*, the parentheses will contain the abbreviation *TSV*.

22 Harrison, James. *Salman Rushdie* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p24.

Rushdie's heterogeneous world view are obviously mutually exclusive perspectives. *The Satanic Verses*, and indeed, the second and third novels I examine in this thesis - Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, and Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game* - issue from the tension generated by this binary opposition.

These three writers all contest the totalising claims of certain myths and consider their intolerance as an impermeable barrier to social cohesion. This is not to assert that they perceive myth as redundant; rather that myth is useful not in a monolithic form, but as a more provisional concept. Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller all recognise the ideological shaping that creates myth as artifact, and seek to call into question the 'naturalness' that obscures its very 'constructedness'. For these authors, myth can salvage its referents from history, but not in the transcendent or authoritative form that endorses a monolithic structure.

At a theoretical level, these differences characterise an aspect of the transition from modernism to post-modernism. In traditional literature, religion and morality had acted as transcendental signifiers which stabilised meaning in the text. For the modernists, however, these paradigms were insufficient to account for the catastrophe of the Great War. Destruction of this magnitude exacerbated the process of destabilising certainties - a process that began in the mid-nineteenth century - denying religion and morality any real purchase to explain the conflict. The once privileged position of religion as an interpretive device for limiting and controlling meaning in literature, was finally lost in 'the panorama of futility and anarchy' of contemporary modernist history. In the place of religion as a guarantor of absolute value, controlling and ordering the textual chaos, the modernists substituted nostalgic myths.

An example is Joyce's use of classical myth in *Ulysses*, where Stephen's actions are allusions to those of Telemachus in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Meaning is determined by interpolating mythical references from a stable source that Joyce locates outside the dynamics of the text. The classical framework of myth is valued precisely because it is perceived as totalising and immutable, and not subject to a proliferation of potential meanings. In a word, it is transcendental.

Such ideas, however, are denied society under the rubric of 'post-modernism'. Like modernism or myth, post-modernism has many different definitions attached to it, so I shall explain the inflection I shall

give the term in the pages that follow. Robert Wilson has noted that post-modernism has two distinct archives: the first constructs (post)modernism as a period, and I shall return to this archive later. The second delineates post-modernism as 'a highly flexible analytical descriptive term capable of isolating conventions, devices and techniques across the range of cultural products that can be caught widely in a transnational net'.²³ In the comparison with modernism, I shall be primarily concerned with this second analytical archive.

Post-modernism understandably reflects a change in attitudes toward the mainstays of modernism. As Linda Hutcheon notes, post-modernism 'exploits, but also undermines, such staples of our humanist tradition as the coherent subject and the accessible historical referent'.²⁴ Post-modern writers are taking part in a new archaeology that rejects the proposed linearity of history. History as a unitary master narrative that encoded public and private experience for modernism, lacks efficacy in a society which has witnessed the loss of the objective referent and the disintegration of the stable subject. A *causal* interpretation of history is shattered by the knowledge that, like myth, history is artifact. It is a human construct that cannot be interpreted by the subject with absolute certainty.

Witness the acknowledgment of Saleem, the insistent and manipulative narrator in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, of the difficulties in creating a stable historical reality:

[t]onight, by screwing the lid firmly on to a jar bearing the legend *Special Formula No.30: 'Abracadabra'*, I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalised my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfections.²⁵

Saleem grapples with the multiplicity of discourses that constitute his sense of self, but ultimately fails to coalesce his fragmented and hybridised history into relatively closed and stable autobiography. The writing of subjectivity into history is an unavoidable revisionist process which is both limiting *and* liberating. Rushdie again:

23 Wilson, Robert. "SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In?Out/In the Post-Modern Nexus", in Tiffin, Helen and Adam, Ian eds. *Past the Last Post* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press), p112-3.

24 Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p46.

25 Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children* (London: Pan Books, 1982), p459.

[h]istory is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks ... History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement.²⁶

While modernism broke up the unitary self and investigated its flux, it nevertheless posited myth as a transcendental signifier beyond the self. By way of contrast, the post-modern self is depthless and fragmented, constituted instead by a multiplicity of discourses. Post-modernism places its faith in 'mutant versions' of subjective realities, and posits no reference point outside the system of self. Consequently, the postmodern text is problematized by the inaccessibility of the real. Events *have* occurred, and historical personages *have* existed, but they can only be incompletely recovered. Post-modern society is characterised by 'the loss of those senses of origination and the real, which, in turn, are presupposed by notions of reference and production'.²⁷

The loss of the transcendent referent has far-reaching consequences in the postmodern text. Meaning proliferates almost unchecked. Is the 'V' that Herbert searches for in Pynchon's novel of the same name someone's mother, someone's mistress, the Bad Priest, Vheissu, or even the whole world gone mad with despair? It is impossible to tell. Modernists like Joyce and Eliot, 'in their paradoxical humanist desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realisation of the inevitable absence of such universals',²⁸ would have posited myth as a master narrative to stem this tide of meaning. Post-modernism, in an undisguised disgust for the totalising, refuses.

Yet post-modernism can be construed as operating contrary to its own ideology. Despite eschewing modernist claims to a totalising authority, post-modernism reiterates this same characteristic through cultural assimilation.

In spite of the identification of post-modernism with difference, discontinuity and fragmentation, it tends to be marketed globally as a general movement which addresses global concerns ... [This] perpetuates an emphasis on 'global culture' masking European and American biases even as they describe this culture as

²⁶ Rushdie, Salman. *Shame* (London: Picador, 1983), p124.

²⁷ During, Simon. "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?" *Landfall* 39 (3) 1985, p367.

²⁸ Hutcheon, Linda. *Op cit*, p6.

decentred, fragmented and marked by difference in opposition to the totalising culture of modernity.²⁹

For all the writers I consider in this dissertation, distancing themselves from any totalising or monolithic tendencies is indicative of their position as post-colonial authors. As 'post-colonial' authors - and by this I mean writers who have inherited the 'lingering legacy of the imperial/colonial relation in all its positive and negative aspects'³⁰ - they are generating literature from their unique position of 'Other', resisting the cultural and ideological hegemony of Euro-American post-modernism.

Far from asserting that Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller do not employ postmodern tropes or techniques, however, this is simply to suggest that their critical emphases differs from the 'global concerns' of post-modernism. Helen Tiffin elaborates.

There is a good deal of formal and tropological overlap between 'primary' texts variously categorised as 'post-modern' or 'post-colonial'. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, or his earlier *Midnight's Children*, provide classic examples of work so appropriated. Very often it is not something intrinsic to a work of fiction which places it as post-modern or post-colonial, but the way in which the text is discussed.³¹

Certainly a work may be termed post-colonial by the way in which the text is discussed, but it may also illustrate its post-colonial concerns by 'focussing on local historical and geographical specificities, situating post-modernism in relation to those practices rather than the other way around'.³² Equally, thematic emphasis can lead the reader toward a post-colonial interpretation. Part of the post-colonial agenda is to 'retrieve and reinscribe those post-colonial social traditions that in literature issue forth at a thematic level ... as principles of cultural identity and survival'.³³

All three writers in my study acknowledge that their literature is generated from a post-colonial perspective, where such terms as:

29 Ferrier, Elizabeth. *Mapping the Space of the Other: Transformations of Space in Postcolonial Fiction and Postmodern Theory* (University of Queensland: Unpublished PhD dissertation, 1990), p17.

30 Brydon, Diana. "The Myths That Write Us: Decolonising the Mind". *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 10 (1) 1987, p4.

31 Tiffin, Helen, and Adam, Ian eds. *Past the Last Post* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), pvii.

32 *Ibid*, pxi.

33 Slemon, Stephen. "Modernism's Last Post", in Tiffin, Helen and Adam, Ian eds. *Op cit*, p5.

'authority' and 'truth' are empirically urgent in their demands. Land claims, racial survival, cultural revival: all these demand an understanding of and a response to the very concepts and structures which post-structuralist academicians refute in language games, few of which recognise the political struggles of real peoples outside such discursive frontiers.³⁴

I have already noted, though, that Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller break down essentialist terms like 'authority' and 'truth'. What I am trying to suggest is that their post-colonial programme recognises that:

the post-modern preoccupation with the crisis of meaning is not everyone's crisis, [and] there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goals and strategies for change in other countries.³⁵

Far from merely engaging in language games, the authors looked at in this discussion are informed by strategies for change and are concerned with social being in modern communities. They perceive a need for *provisional* truth forms that reject the totalising but possess sufficient weight to reinforce culturally specific notions of identity and place.

Each writer therefore undertakes the crucial post-colonial task of locating identity and place, examining how such concepts are constructed at all levels of society. Each attempts to illustrate how essentialist notions like 'truth' or 'authority' can give rise to totalising theories which salve the subject's anxieties about identity and place. Furthermore, each interrogates these theories not as natural law but as monolithic myths; that in demanding adherence and legislating in favour of intolerance, are destructive in a post-modern world that has become too complex and heterogeneous for such simple purities.

The post-modern age per se, while a site of resistance for post-colonial authors and critics, is not the central concern in this discussion. What is important is the theme of transition *to*, and how this transition is reflected *by*, the post-modern age. On one hand there is the cultural and theoretical transition from modernism to post-modernism. On the other hand, there is a transition from what Anna Yeatman terms a 'customary' to a 'conventionalist' community. She defines and characterises the former thus:

34 Tapping, Craig. "Literary Reflections on Orality: Colin Johnson's *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*". Paper delivered at MLA Convention, New Orleans, December 1988, p36.

35 Sangari, Kumkum. "The Politics of the Possible". *Cultural Critique* (7) 1987, p184.

[a] customary national community is structured in terms of the logic of kinship. This accords it two primary axes: vertical, the axis of descent; and horizontal, the axis of a procreatively orientated distinction between male and female. All who come under the nation are understood to be its children because they share in a community of descent.³⁶

The existence of this community depends upon its exclusiveness.

It is *this*, not *that*, national community of common descent. While intermarriage and shared histories which intimately link this national community to its immediate neighbours are acknowledged in everyday life, these interconnections are denied within the national imaginary for they clearly challenge the idea of this community as a separate and exclusive one. This is a national community whose sense of self demands that it goes to war if these exclusive boundaries of community and territory are threatened by another national community (*LID*, 210).

Monolithic myths, which themselves contain this binary tenet, thus become a powerful device for cohering and structuring this type of society. The relationship is symbiotic. Community engenders myth, and myth shores up the idea that the community always already exists in an unproblematic way.³⁷ 'It is a "natural" community, where "natural" here connotes what are taken to be the organic, customary ties of communities built on common descent and customarily shared ways of life' (*LID*, 213).

Yet the cultural exclusivism of the customary community is being contested. Modern consumer capitalism is not the only freight that is being transported across national borders: the post-modern age is witnessing unprecedented levels of movement in human freight. Facilitated by efficient transportation systems, people are spilling over borders and establishing new lives for themselves in countries other than their birthplace. The customary community is being confronted with the prospect of assimilation, and the need for a community constructed in terms of a non-exclusive and complex cultural identity.

36 Yeatman, Anna. "A Leap Into the Dark", in Sharp, Andrew ed. *State and Community* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), p209. Any further references to this edition will be contained parenthetically in the body of the text thus (*LID*).

37 See Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in Lodge, David ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (New York: Longman, 1988), p109-110. In this discussion, Derrida outlines a deconstructive approach to the idea of the 'centre'. This 'centre' parallels the function of myth in the customary community. Derrida states: 'the function of this centre is not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure ... but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the [meaning or] play of the structure'. Furthermore, 'the concept of a centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on fundamental ground ... and on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered [although] the centre has no natural site'.

In this transition of people from one country to another we locate the genesis of the conventionalist state. This national community is understood to be one that is:

constructed in terms of the historically specific traditions and conventions of a particular national democracy. These traditions and conventions are understood to be contestable in terms of the value of political participation by all those who belong to this national community (*LID*, 211).

All ethnic groups contribute to the identity of the state, 'and its politics must and will reflect an internal politics of difference in respect of ethnic lingual community'. Furthermore, this type of national community 'necessarily calls into question customary, i.e. culturally exclusive, kinship-ethnic loyalties (*LID*, 211).

Tension arises between these two social narratives because they exist in a state of 'simultaneity'. 'We make a signal mistake if we conceive of customary and conventionalist nationalism's as, respectively, two progressive steps on an evolutionary social ladder' (*LID*, 217). They exist both simultaneously in the world as separate values systems underwriting the community of nation, and as opposing truth claims within the community of nation itself. Although aware of the concomitant presence of these narratives of nation, Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller have, as migrants themselves, a vested interest in championing conventionalist values. They see that 'boundaries ... exist to be transgressed, they are there to facilitate crossings, not to frustrate them'.³⁸

Problematically, as Miller observes, 'crossings' from a customary to a conventionalist society or vice versa make for a confusing heritage and a radically altered sense of self and place. Furthermore, exposure to these two opposed systems in any one community, as occurs in *The Satanic Verses*, can cause a frustrating and painful re-evaluation of the individual's own values. All three texts assert that notions of identity and place are complex ideas informed by a variety of cultural traditions and values. The myths that endorse these notions of identity and place must reflect this subjective and provisional status. It is of critical importance to the post-colonial authors examined in this thesis, that none of these traditions or values should be denied in the process of

38 Miller, Alex. *The Ancestor Game* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1992), p194. Any further references to this edition will be contained paranthetically in the body of the text. In chapters other than that pertaining specifically to *The Ancestor Game*, the parantheses will contain the abbreviation *TAG*.

constituting identity or 'homeland'. Rather, such concepts should be a conflation of all contributing variables.

Herein we witness the privileging of post-colonial concerns over the post-modern. Faced with the threat of erasure by the totalising consumer culture of Euro-America, post-colonial writers desire to retain cultural specificity and integrity. Stephen Slemon highlights the issue by noting that post-modernism:

needs to exclude the cultural and political specificity of post-colonial representations in order to assimilate them to a rigorously Euro-American problematic.³⁹

With respect to identity, reinstating the cultural specificity in post-colonialism is seen to combat the erasure of difference that is a result of the post-modern project.

Some of the fundamental contrasts and similarities between post-colonial and post-modern attitudes: to culture, community, identity and history; can be illustrated with reference to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. With respect to culture, the only parameters post-modernism places on meaning is its citing of a procession of cultural styles evident in contemporary society, though these are at best protean and fragmenting. In Don DeLillo's mind, the cultural vogue he sees as underwriting North American lifestyles is writ large:

The station wagons arrive at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. I've witnessed this spectacle for twenty one years. It is a brilliant event, invariably. The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well made faces and wry looks. This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies and laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded, the spiritually akin, a nation.⁴⁰

There is a conspicuous absence here of any transcendental signifier of cultural unity; society has become atomised. Religion ('liturgies') and even political force ('laws') cede to the dictates of pop culture. For post-modernism, as for post-colonialism, no monolithic myth orders and coheres society. But where post-colonial discourse would want to

39 Slemon, Stephen. *Op cit*, p9.

40 DeLillo, Don. *White Noise* (London: Pan Books, 1986), pp3-4. Any further references to this edition will be contained parenthetically in the body of the text thus (WN).

invoke culturally specific ideas and values to indicate community, post-modernism playfully offers the communal trope of a 'conscientious suntan'.

In their desire challenge monolithic myths, both discourses acknowledge the need for the individual to give coherence to an identity. Initially Jack Gladney, the central character in *White Noise*, creates his own myth of self, 'growing out and toward' the figure of Hitler, and eventually becoming the most prominent figure in Hitler studies in North America. Jack actually informs the reader that he invented Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill in North America in 'March 1968 ... [where it met] with immediate and electrifying success' (WN, p4). There is an element of self-determination in Gladney's identity which distinguishes it from an identity bestowed by a totalising myth.

It is also distinguishable from post-colonial notions of identity. In *The Satanic Verses* and *The Ancestor Game*, for example, identity is a considered fusion of past influences and present realities. Saladin Chamcha must reconcile his Indian upbringing with his adult life in London in *The Satanic Verses*, and Stephen Muir must learn to live with the seemingly overpowering legacy of his father to create Australia as home in *The Ancestor Game*. The principle here is that post-colonial identity is not engendered in a vacuum. It can never be a complete work of fiction. Individual histories are constituent influences that must be considered in the formulation of self, and the subject must be sufficiently stable to shape these influences into a coherent identity.

In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney's identity is revealed as a pure fiction. One of Jack's colleagues maintains that:

[t]his is the centre, the unquestioned source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. It must be deeply satisfying for you. It has an identity, a sense of achievement. I marvel at the effort. It was masterful, shrewd and stunningly preemptive. It's what I want to do with Elvis (WN, pp11-12).

Gladney has fictionalised Hitler, created the despot as his own, and in so doing has fictionalised himself. It is the last comment, the aligning of a megalomaniac who oversaw the slaughter of millions, with a pop icon whose resonant voice saw millions swoon, that leads us to the essentially parodic nature of the myth that surrounds Jack Gladney. His has been a lifetime of image building and self-aggrandisement, the creation of an

'academic myth of self'. But this fiction is repeatedly mocked and undermined by the parodic dynamics of the text.

This crisis in explication arises from post-modernism's ambivalent need to both recognise the historical referent but strip it of real presence or value as a signifier of contemporary social order. Slemon observes:

a post-modernist criticism would want to argue that literary practice exposes the constructedness of all textuality and thus calls down the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another, and *interested* post-colonial critical practice would want to allow for the positive production of oppositional truth-claims in these texts. It would retain for post-colonial writing, that is, a mimetic or referential purchase to textuality, and it would recognise in this referential drive the operations of a crucial strategy for survival in marginalised social groups.⁴¹

Where for Rushdie and Miller the influence of history is unavoidable and open to 'positive production', for DeLillo the return to history is presupposed by the knowledge that the journey is in itself futile: history is merely a multiplicity of competing fictions. History has lost its linear thrust in post-modern society, and becomes a disposable style rather than a constituent influence. Witness Jack and Babbette imitating pornography from any century they wish: 'Etruscan slave girls, Georgian rakes, flagellation brothels ... what about the middle ages?' (WN, p29). Finally Jack confides, 'I decided on the twentieth century' (WN, p30). Even the twentieth century is a style, something one is not born into, but to be impersonated. In stark contrast to post-colonialism's 'referential purchase', post-modernism thwarts a recuperative approach to history: history is available only as a referential palimpsest that can be fashionably reinscribed by anyone 'quick to see the possibilities' (WN, p4).

Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller, then, although borrowing heavily from post-modern themes and techniques, set themselves apart from both modernist and post-modernist practice with their distinctly post-colonial agenda. They share the post-modernist desire to call down totalising narratives, identifying these narratives as human constructs that embody a mythical form. Myth, in the sense that I am employing the term, can never simply be a pure post-modern fiction devoid of

41 Slemon, Stephen. *Op cit*, p5.

referential purchase. Rather, it possesses force and weight to oil the cogs of culture and to sustain the individual.

Myths are stories we tell ourselves that are infused with coded messages. When deconstructed, myths reveal our (often covert) communal and individual sense of identity and place. Identity and place, however, are fluid concepts in an age where displacement and heterogeneity are the defining characteristics. Post-colonial writing, with its preoccupation with the concepts of identity and place, must therefore undertake the task of deconstructing monolithic myth to reveal the components of these concepts, and suggest how they might be reassembled and reconciled with a more complex post-modern environment. For Rushdie, Ondaatje, and Miller, the project is therefore to ensure human survival: to interrogate the 'charged space between the present reality of our individual life and the dream of the immortality of our species' (*TAG*, 259). For in this charged space, these writers acknowledge, lies myth; the charter for humanity's continued existence. In a sense, then, their work must constitute an examination of myth's very form.

Salman Rushdie.

The Wisdom of Uncertainty: *The Satanic Verses.*

At some point the writing is going to perform the same migration that I did. Because otherwise it becomes spurious to spend your life living in the West and writing exotically about far distant lands.

Rushdie, *Kunapipi* interview.

Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed up human beings.

Rushdie, *In Good Faith*.

With a single utterance on February 14, 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini created Salman Rushdie as both an apostate of Islam and one of the most vilified men in contemporary society. The delivery of the *fatwa* (the verbal coding of Rushdie's death sentence in terms of Muslim law) expressed the rage of Islam ensuing from the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The controversy has often been violent and has consistently transcended national, political, cultural and religious boundaries by challenging preconceptions and fragmenting opinion. As some nations leapt to douse the novel's inflammatory material with censorship, others let it burn in a pyre-like tribute to freedom of expression. While it seems that some Muslims, especially those in Europe and America, do not find the novel an affront to their faith, some Christian groups have ironically sided with incensed fundamentalist Muslims in a united front against Rushdie's religious insensitivity. Still others feel the novel to be blasphemous, yet decry the death sentence that has been issued against its author.⁴²

These are but a few issues of many that the Rushdie affair has foregrounded. Despite the intensity of the global focus and its implicit promise of diverse and insightful interpretation, most of the attention solicited by *The Satanic Verses* has merely resulted in a reductive reading of the text. In the foreground of these readings is the religious meditation of one of Rushdie's two central characters, Gibreel Farishta. His unsettling dream sequences understandably cause distress to Islamic

⁴² For a comprehensive examination of the furore that surrounds the novel, see Ruthven, Malise. *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), especially pages 1-10, and 151-5.

eyes and certainly need to be addressed. By virtue of their status as religious 'heresy', however, these chapters have created such political upheaval as to practically obliterate the novel. My reading attempts a tentative reconstruction of the novel that traces the themes and motifs which reveal the text as a well-woven whole.

The post-colonial implications for the text are predominantly thematic. In reintroducing the seemingly forgotten 'Chamcha-chapters', with their focus on migration and scathing social criticism, and further illustrating their thematic links with the spiritual dilemmas of Gibreel, I am suggesting the very history of the 'Rushdie Affair' can, in a sense, be rewritten. The initial promise of alternative interpretations by a global audience reasserts itself through a post-colonial contextualisation. That is to say, a highlighting of the post-colonial concerns of place, identity, the effects of a 'colonising' history, and the need for provisional myths, open the novel up to a radically different interpretation than those presently attached to it.

The underlying thrust of my argument is encapsulated in the quotes heading this introduction. Here Rushdie isolates two considerations that I believe are essential for an understanding of *The Satanic Verses*. The first statement stands as testament to the notion that we cannot divorce text from context. Linda Hutcheon has compellingly argued that '[p]ostmodernist art situates itself squarely in the context of its own creation and reception in a social and ideological reality'.⁴³ This is a belief which Rushdie himself supports in his assertion that, 'politics and literature, like sport and politics, do mix, are inextricably mixed, and that mixture has consequences'.⁴⁴ Culture, in other words, is instrumental in the production and reception of literature, as by its very nature, literature is a cultural form.

With these observations in mind, I believe it becomes important to see *The Satanic Verses* as a vehicle for advancing a secular man's view of society, not simply an attack on a conservative Islam, and at the same time a novel whose concerns are found not in the 'far distant lands' of Rushdie's youth, but those that reside with him in his adopted home of England. And, naturally enough for writing that makes the same migration that Rushdie did, the social concerns articulated in the

43 Hutcheon, Linda. "Challenging the Conventions of Realism: Postmodernism in Canadian Literature". *The Canadian Forum* (April) 1986, p34.

44 Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1992), p100.

novel - hybridisation, ghettoization and racial prejudice - evidence Rushdie's socio-political agenda written for, and aimed at, England.

The second consideration is his rejection of monolithic myth as a basis for community. Rushdie labels himself 'a mongrel, history's bastard', to accentuate notions of impurity and fragmentation in his own life: and in this he conceives of himself as representative of the human subject in the post-modern age. Echoing Milan Kundera, Rushdie attacks the pretensions to Truth and purity inherent in monolithic myths by accepting 'uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing'.⁴⁵ I will argue that it is this inability of the post-modern subject to maintain any structure as a monolithic myth - whether in respect of religious belief or personal identity - which is the primary focus of the novel. This lack of totalising influence in contemporary society is reflected in a dual dimension in *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's concerns are made clear with the creation of *two* central characters, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta. While each is racked with doubt, the former finds his certainties assailed at the secular (societal) level, while the latter experiences doubts at the spiritual (individual) level.

Yet these observations could be leaping ahead of themselves, for, as Gibreel exuberantly declares in song in the opening lines of the novel, '[t]o be born again, first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa!' (3). In other words, birth is predicated on death; doubt is predicated on change. For newness to enter the world, the old must allow for the new: for Saladin and Gibreel to begin to doubt, they must first undergo change.

In typical Rushdie fashion, this change is presented in terms of magic realism, a world in which an Air India jumbo jet can be blown up over the English channel and still have survivors! Yet the scene also displays elements of post-modern literary pastiche as, reminiscent of Satan's fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the two fortunate passengers are radically altered by the descent. Whilst plummeting,

embracing head-to-tail and performing germinate cartwheels, Chamcha in his semi-consciousness was seized by the notion that he, too, had acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid, as if he were growing into the person whose head nestled now between his legs and whose legs were wrapped around his long patrician neck (7).

⁴⁵ *Ibid* pp404-5.

While this passage suggests the potential for change through fusion and hybridity, its erotic language signals the potential for birth, or, as it eventuates, for rebirth. 'Born again, Spoono, you and me. Happy birthday mister; happy birthday to you', are the first words Gibreel utters to Saladin on the snowbound English beach. In reply to this tribute, 'Chamcha coughed, spluttered, opened his eyes, and, as befitted a new-born babe, burst into foolish tears' (10).

Of significance here, however, is the fact that the reader has been thrust into the narrative in *media res*; and for the remainder of the opening chapter we are informed about the life histories of the two characters to date. From an early age Gibreel had a deep bond with his parents, especially his mother. His choice of pseudonym 'had been his way of making a homage to the memory of his dead mother, "my mummyji, my one and only Mamo, because who else was it who started the whole angel business, her personal angel, she called me, *farishta*"' (17). After his mother's sudden death, Gibreel, witnessing his father's grief and the man's desperate 'need to defeat the son and regain, thereby, his usurped primacy in the affections of his dead wife', decides to disengage from the 'inarticulate contest' that had sprung up between Najmudden senior and junior, and allow his father the triumph of the 'greater labour, [that] would indicate the greater love' (19).

More important than the filial piety of Gibreel's waking world, though, is his devotion to the world of the invisible, the supernatural. Even before his mother's death, Gibreel 'had become convinced of the existence of the supernatural world. He grew up believing in God, angels, demons, afreet, djinns, as matter-of-factly as if they were bullock-carts or lamp posts' (21-2). In the throes of adolescence:

to get his mind off the subject of love and desire, he studied, devouring the metamorphic myths of Greece and Rome, the avatars of Jupiter, everything ... the incident of the Satanic verses in the early career of the Prophet, and the surrealism of the newspapers, in which butterflies could fly into young girls' mouths, asking to be consumed (23-4).

Rushdie pointedly draws attention to this passage by foreshadowing two later episodes in the novel, namely Ayesha's pilgrimage and the satanic verses incident itself. By extension, the reader is left to attach considerable weight to the suggestion that Gibreel can give some meaning and order to his life through myth. He 'compar[es] his own condition', for example, with that of the Prophet at

the time when, having been orphaned and short of funds, he made a great success of his job as the business manager of the wealthy widow Khadija' (22).

Myth has an absolute presence for Gibreel, becoming both a charter for his very existence, and so fundamental that it strikes him 'as a failure in his own sight that he had never seen a ghost' (22). Myth is a monolithic construct for him: a story that explains in dramatic form his present reality, but that also legislates for his identity and role. Hence with his career, the mythical element that he so willingly embraced as a child and adolescent is instrumental in launching him into stardom. 'His big break', the narrator tells us, 'arrived with the coming of the theological movies'. Suddenly he was a superstar and, 'after playing the Elephant headed god [Ganesh], he was permitted to remove the thick, pendulous, grey mask, and put on, instead, a long, hairy tail, in order to play Hanuman the monkey king' (24).

Religious mythology increasingly becomes an intrinsic part of Gibreel's life, a life that much like Jack Gladney in DeLillo's *White Noise*, he 'grows' into. Life creates the myth then finally imitates it. Gibreel refuses the exotic requests of young ladies who would have him wear the Ganesh-mask while making love, for example, 'out of respect for the dignity of the god ... whilst [also] practicing the art of dissimulation, because a man who plays gods must be beyond reproach' (25). Always larger than life on the screen, it would seem that in his own mind, and indeed in the minds of many viewers, Gibreel is attributed the status of demi-god.

Rushdie's specific invocation of religious mythology and its crucial role in creating 'Gibreel the superstar' enables the reader to perceive Gibreel's function in the novel more clearly. He symbolises the Indian national consciousness as Rushdie perceives it. For in this country the first thing you notice, 'apart from the sheer number of people living there, is that they believe in God', and thus any representation of a national consciousness must 'permit God to exist - the divine to be as real as the divan'.⁴⁶

In the novel it is Swatilekha that illustrates the parallel between the Indian treatment of the spiritual world and my definition of myth. 'Society', she maintains, 'is orchestrated ... by *grand narratives*. In

⁴⁶ Rushdie, Salman and Wajsbrot, Cecile. "Utiliser une technique qui permette à Dieu d'exister". *Quinzaine Littéraire*, (no. 449) 1985, p22.

India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had excluded the masses from the ethical project. As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of the grand narratives, that is, religious faith' (537). Religious narrative is an artifact that operates as though it springs forth from nature. Thus religious myths, although constructed, act in India as a natural charter for existence; a guarantor of worth, role, and individual and national identity.

The dual presence of the spiritual and secular realms combined with a skyrocketing career in theological movies - in which, most importantly, he excels in portrayals of the manifold Hindu gods despite being Muslim himself - can be seen as an embodiment in Gibreel of Rushdie's 'Indian' vision. A deep sense of the mythical and an ability to contribute to, and live within, a diverse, hybridised culture seem respectively to be the definitive and most desirable qualities of India for Rushdie. To reinforce and enlarge on this notion in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai's very upbringing stands as testament to the multiplicity of cultures and beliefs that contribute to the concept of 'India'. Born to an English father by a Hindu mother, raised by a Muslim couple and a Goanese ayah - who is at once paranoid, catholic and influenced by her Marxist lover - and swept through all classes of Indian society before the novel concludes, Saleem's evolving consciousness could be seen to parallel Gibreel's in its depiction of the hybridised sub-continent.

The creation of Gibreel as a cultural and religious icon, the 'popular figurehead' of the nation, is calculated to heighten the sense of calamity when he actually loses his Islamic faith. The sickness that strikes Gibreel down while filming at Kanya Kumari contributes to this sense of catastrophe, with his plummeting blood-count being labelled by experts, 'a freak mystery ... an act of God' (28). While the 'whole of India was at Gibreel's bedside [and] his condition the lead item on every radio bulletin' (28), Gibreel himself spends every waking minute calling upon God. 'Ya Allah whose servant lies bleeding do not abandon me now after watching over me so long ... show me some sign, some small mark of your favour' (30), pleads Gibreel, only to be answered by a heavy, portentous silence. Then the realisation that, 'he was talking to thin air, that nobody was there at all, and then he felt more foolish than ever in his life ... Allah, just be there, damn it, just be there' (30).

In this frustrated injunction the reader observes Gibreel's first encounter with a condition Milan Kundera describes as 'the difficulty of knowing and the elusiveness of truth'.⁴⁷ The unsolicited arrival of Doubt is a watershed in the life of Gibreel: if doubt undermines monolithic myth as an absolute value in which to believe, and thus leaves such a myth flawed as means of cohering and organising life, how in the face of doubt does one go about reconstructing, ordering and giving meaning to one's existence? Or, to put it another way, how does the subject replenish the hole after the loss of a totalising myth to provide a prefabricated sense of unity and coherence?

While these questions will torment Gibreel spiritually, they assail Salahuddin Chamchawala at the secular level. Initially, though, there is one similarity between the earlier lives of the men. Salahuddin hero-worships his father Changez Chamchawala, 'philanthropist, philanderer, living legend, [and] leading light of the nationalist movement' (36), with the same pre-adolescent adoration that Gibreel displays for his mother. Yet while Gibreel remains forever secure in his relationship with his mother, the paternal relationship for Salahuddin becomes a source of anguish and frustration.

For many years, in Changez Chamchawala's teak-lined study, there stood a lamp, 'a brightly polished copper-and-brass avatar of Alladdin's very own genie-container' (36). To the young Salahuddin this symbolised the promise and hope that the world of his father, the world of India, held for him. 'One day', Changez assured the boy, 'you will have it for yourself. Then rub and rub it as much as you like and see what doesn't come to you. Just now, but, it is mine' (36). In this manner the dream of the magic lamp infected the boy, telling him that 'one day his troubles would end and his innermost desires would be gratified, and all he had to do was wait it out' (36).

This belief presupposes the infallibility of the father, 'the great man, Abbu, Dad' (40-1), and yet the incident of the wallet,⁴⁸ the confusion of confiscated pounds sterling, clearly signals to Salahuddin that 'his father would smother all his hopes unless he got away' (37). Salahuddin had created a monolithic myth around the figure of his

47 Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 1988), p16.

48 The 'incident of the wallet' refers to Salahuddin's discovery of a billfold in a bus: 'full of cash ... Pounds Sterling, from Proper London in the fabled country of Vilayet' (35). This windfall is swiftly pocketed by Changez, who admonishes his son with the words, 'Tch, tch, you should not pick things up from the street. The ground is dirty and money is dirtier, anyway' (36).

father that to the child guaranteed security and success, 'a crock of gold' (36), and to which Salahuddin assigned all the authority of religious doctrine. So integral was this belief to the boy that in later life the 'westernised', adult Saladin can accuse his father of '*becoming my supreme being, so what happened was like a loss of faith*' (41). With the destruction of this myth of patriarchal promise the whole Bombay world of 'dust, vulgarity, policemen in shorts, transvestites, movie fanzines, pavement sleepers and the rumoured singing whores of Grant Road' (37), becomes intolerable to Salahuddin. 'From that moment', the reader is told, 'he became desperate to leave, to escape, to place oceans between the great man and himself' (37).

Thus begins the slow metamorphosis from Salahuddin Chamchawala to Saladin Chamcha, prompted by the realisation that he is destined for that, 'cool Vilayet full of the crisp promises of pounds sterling at which the magic billfold had hinted' (37). Finding the self-determination needed to eschew the colonising influence of his father, and conceiving of England as an escape, Salahuddin begins to construct a new myth of Englishness. This process is hastened by Bombay inflicting a final humiliation on the already disillusioned Salahuddin. On the beach at Scandal Point, where 'the mystery of rock pools drew him toward the stranger', Salahuddin finds himself forced to commit sexual indecencies and afterwards maintain a terrified silence. It seemed to him that,

everything loathsome, everything he had come to revile about his home town, had come together in the stranger's bony embrace, and now that he had escaped that evil skeleton he must also escape Bombay, or die (38).

The scandal at the eponymously-named Point is instrumental, along with Salahuddin's feelings of betrayal over the billfold, in his acceptance of Changez Chamchawala's offer of an education in London.

In England, too, Changez makes a further offer to Salahuddin, holding out, 'at arm's length, a black billfold about whose identity there could be no mistake. "You are a man now. Take"' (41). For Salahuddin, the confiscated currency was bestowed and accepted as a token of his father's love, a gift of manhood. Thus the belated stipulation by Changez that, '[n]ow that you are a man ... You pay the bills' (42), strips the occasion of any joy and turns the fortnight in London before he joins his boarding school into 'a nightmare of cash-

tills and calculations' (42). The transformation of his 'crock of gold' into a 'sorcerer's curse' by his father sets in place an implacable rage in Salahuddin, which would 'boil away his childhood father-worship and make him a secular man, who would do his best, thereafter, to live without a god of any type' (43).

The birth of this sentiment adds another dimension to the metamorphosis of Salahuddin into the Anglophile Saladin. No longer content with simply placing physical 'oceans' of distance between his father, India, and himself, Salahuddin determines to erect cultural barriers as well. He resolves to migrate irrevocably from 'Indianness to Englishness, an immeasurable distance' (41), and become 'the thing his father was-not-could-never-be, that is, a goodandproper Englishman' (43).

An important consideration at this stage, and one which I shall enlarge on later, is the link between the loss of myth, commitment to a secular life, and the migration to Britain. Rushdie is establishing archetypes which lend themselves to the illustration of thematic concerns later in the novel. India in Rushdie's scheme is clearly the world in which myth and the mundane can harmoniously co-exist. Britain is the secular west where doubt is pervasive and authoritative myths have been lost. Significantly, the journey from Bombay to Ellowen Deeowen, 'London', is one that both Gibreel and Salahuddin undertake after a foundering of their mythical convictions. An important distinction, however, is that for the former the migration is motivated by *doubts* about Allah, while the latter is driven by a *disbelief* in the 'supreme being' in his life, namely his father, and the India that Changez represents.

In the construction of Salahuddin's myth of Englishness, then, there is no room for equivocation or doubt: 'He would be English ... find masks that these fellows would recognise, paleface masks, clown-masks, until he fooled them into thinking he was *okay*, he was *people-like-us*' (43). Disbelief in the monolithic myth of the great 'Abbu', leads Salahuddin to create a monolithic myth of Englishness. He perceives the 'immeasurable distance' between the two societies as the distance between the customary and conventionalist models of community. In the tolerant, conventionalist England, Salahuddin believes he can reinvent himself.

With surgical sterility and precision, Salahuddin removes from his life the Indianness that he has learned to despise. The dream of success in the world of his father, represented by the genie-lamp of his childhood, has become tarnished: the dream of 'Alladdin' reduced to a sullied 'Saladin'. This shortening of his name to the Anglicised 'Saladin' is paradoxically a lengthy exercise in self-invention, and even Salahuddin 'is astonished by his own perseverance' (49). Ultimately the mutation is realised by the (ironic?) removal of the hu(e) from his name. The transition from Indianness to Englishness is absolute, an uncompromising shift of allegiance from one myth of the nation to another.

As with Gibreel, however, when doubt contests the truth of monolithic belief the results can be devastating. For example, although claiming to be the 'Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice', and also to having forgotten Hindustani, Saladin is powerless to prevent the consonants and vowels of India sneaking up on him and leaping out his unguarded mouth.

'I have a gift for accents', Saladin claims haughtily, 'Why I shouldn't employ?'
 'Why I should not employ?' she mimicked him, kicking her legs in the air.
 'Mister actor, your moustache just slipped again'.
 Oh my God.
 What's happening to me?
 What the Devil?
 Help (60).

The comment about 'the moustache slipping' is Zeenat Vakil's metaphoric reference to the cracks appearing in Saladin's previously unflawed English accent. Saladin is distressed by the return of his suppressed Indian locutions: he is reduced from virtual logorrhoea, 'ruling the airways of Britain' (60), to a barely articulate plea for help.

Saladin's trauma centres on another lapse of faith, although this time not in his father and not to the extent of total disbelief: rather, doubt in the persona that he has created for himself. 'Question: 'What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain. Itself a kind of closed belief. Doubt. The human condition' (90). This doubt in Saladin's life is occasioned by his return to India with the 'Prospero Players', an acting troupe interpreting *The Millionairess* by George Bernard Shaw. This expatriate return to Bombay has the unexpected consequence of moving Saladin within range of the 'vortex' that is Zeeny Vakil. The 'first Indian woman that Saladin had ever made love

to, she barged into his dressing room after the first night of *The Millionairess* as if it hadn't been years' (51). The familiarity and self-confidence of Zeeny's entrance are indicative of her aggressive personality, seen also in her resolution to make Saladin 'her project, "The reclamation of"', she explains. 'Mister, we're going to get you back' (58).

The exuberant Zeeny personifies the first murmurings of an Indian voice which has been long since quieted in Saladin. Witness the description of her work as an art critic early on in the novel:

[s]he was an art critic whose book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest? - had created a predictable stink (52).

In the light of my earlier assertions about Rushdie's Indian vision, it could be argued that in this respect that Zeeny speaks for Rushdie, even to the extent that her work, in its 'predictable stink', anticipates the outcry over the *Satanic Verses*. Like Rushdie, she is contesting monolithic myths that claim to possess 'authenticity' and 'Truth', substituting her own eclectic vision in their place. In these terms, Zeeny's significance lies in her embodiment of those parts of India that Saladin has managed to suppress, but has failed to exorcise from himself: 'the passion, the seriousness, the respect' (58). She is 'a siren, tempting him back to his old self', a foil to the ominous warning that sounds in Saladin's mind. 'When you step through the looking-glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds' (58).

That Zeeny fails to hold Saladin is evidenced by his tumbling, cartwheeling fall with Gibreel from the doomed jumbo-jet *Bostan*. Here the life histories of the two men converge in the present and the narrative pushes forward. It has been argued that doubt assails both men at different levels, secular and spiritual, and that the novel traces their attempts to expunge doubt from their lives and recuperate a former wholeness. I have also proposed, however, that Rushdie places this process in an immigrant context to force the writing to enact the same migration that he has.

As the chapters about Gibreel are a specific examination of the effects of religious doubt transposed into a western context, it is worthwhile to now commence with the Chamcha chapters. These

undertake a broader consideration of the immigrant condition as seen through the troubled eyes of a man who has been stripped of certainty and clothed in an unfamiliar identity.

A convenient point of departure is where the wearied traveller's air journey ends and the story of Chamcha begins. Having been taken into the care of Rosa Diamond, an eccentric old woman who has found Saladin and Gibreel freezing on the coastline after their descent from the *Bostan*,

Chamcha attempted to remind himself of himself. I am a real man, he told the mirror, with a real history and a planned out future. I am a man to whom certain things are of importance: rigour, self-discipline, reason, the pursuit of what is noble without recourse to that old crutch, God. The ideal of beauty, the possibility of exaltation, the mind (135-6).

It is important for Saladin to try and remind himself who exactly he is, because his identity is a concept now under siege from India. Thus the 'things of importance' he enumerates are cultivated British values that in their exclusively secular nature are intolerant of his Indian heritage.

The irony here is that Chamcha still has the audacity to cite personal 'history' as fundamental to his existence, when he has deliberately contrived a form of historio-cultural amnesia to obliterate his childhood and adolescence. As a corollary, the only history that Saladin can possibly be invoking here is the colonising history of the British Empire: a narrative version based on myths of racial, religious and cultural superiority.

This narrative past locates and represents in terms of centres and peripheries, mainstreams and margins. In the words of Edward Said,

[t]he exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient.⁴⁹

Imperial history therefore designates identity according to stereotyped representations, 'national' images, nominating insider or outsider status without reference to specific culture, colour or creed.

As if to emphasise these notions of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, Rushdie mockingly puns on Saladin's abbreviated name, 'Chamcha', which in Urdu means both 'spoon' and 'sycophant'. Here it

⁴⁹ Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (New York: Twayne, 1979), p125.

is suggested that Saladin's attempt to integrate the sum of English characteristics, to become more 'English' than the English, is a validation and consolidation of colonial rhetoric. This point is brought home to the reader through Saladin's courtship of his wife, Pamela Lovelace. The allusion in her name to Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* suggests that like Mr B.-'s initially corrupted pursuit of his 'Pamela', Saladin's motivation is a purely self-interested desire for possession of a woman as means to an end. For Saladin, the desired end is to become English. In his eyes Pamela Lovelace is the embodiment of the finest 'English' characteristics: '*as frail as porcelain, as graceful as gazelles*' (59). A warning that such purity does not exist lies in the fact that Saladin's metaphors are furnished not by England, but by the Orient and Africa.

Saladin still believes, however, that his winning over of Pamela is a rite of passage into an English society so tight-knit that from the outside it seems almost hermetically sealed. 'He understood that she had become the custodian of his destiny, and that if she did not relent then his entire attempt at metamorphosis would fail' (50). The miserable reality is, however, that Saladin 'allowed himself to believe in that smile, that brilliant counterfeit of joy' (51). For underneath the inviting features of this fraudulent face, Pamela the English rose harbours a life-story that in its unanswerable crassness parallels the India of Saladin's childhood.

Only when it was too late did she tell him that her parents had committed suicide together when she had just begun to menstruate, over their heads in gambling debts, leaving her with an aristocratic bellow of a voice that marked her out as a golden girl, a woman to envy, [when really] she had no confidence at all, and every moment she spent in the world was full off panic ... and maybe once a week she locked the door and shook and felt like a husk, like an empty peanut shell, a monkey without a nut (50).

The dry tone in this passage belies the social diatribe. The English society to which Saladin seeks admittance, 'work[ing] so hard and com[ing] so close to convincing himself of the truth of these paltry fictions' (51), is, like Pamela, 'an empty peanut shell, a monkey without a nut'. It exists only as a facade, ridiculing Saladin's confidence in the inaccessible Englishness of his wife.

Furthermore, while Saladin obviously wishes such a utopia were accessible to afford his life meaning and purpose, his realisation that he was having to 'convince himself' expresses his own doubt that such an

absolute English archetype actually exists. Part of Rushdie's purpose here, then, could be to ridicule the bigoted arrogance of those in contemporary society who persist in promulgating the racist myths of ethnocentrism. Rushdie entertains no such belief, stating recently that:

[t]hose who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure.⁵⁰

Clearly it would be of great concern to a immigrant writer that the rhetoric of racial prejudice could have such currency in his chosen domicile.

Just such an anxiety is visible in Saladin's brutal and degrading treatment at the hands of the British authorities. Early in chapter three, for example, when the hapless traveller is taken into custody by immigration officials for failing to supply appropriate identification papers, Saladin finds himself the subject of verbal and physical abuse. His humiliation begins with the immigration officer's merry announcement of Saladin's 'debagging': '[o]pening time, Packy; lets see what you're made of!' Although Saladin has an inkling of the metamorphosis gripping his body, having already glimpsed his set of horns in a mirror, 'he could not prevent a disbelieving giggle from escaping past his teeth ... when he saw what lay beneath his borrowed pyjamas' (157). Saladin's body had mutated:

[h]is thighs had grown uncommonly wide and powerful, as well as hairy. Below the knee the hairiness came to a halt, and his legs narrowed into tough, bony, almost fleshless calves ... such as one might find on any billy-goat. Saladin was also taken aback by the sight of his phallus, greatly enlarged and embarrassingly erect, an organ that he had the greatest difficulty in acknowledging as his own. 'What's this, then?' joked Novak - the former 'Hisser' - giving it a playful tweak. 'Fancy one of us, maybe? (157)

In this passage, the notion of racial difference is being awfully accentuated by the addition of physical dimension. This translates Saladin not just metaphorically but literally into something beyond 'Other', into something primitive, sexual, bestial.

The denigration of the outsider is symptomatic of the logic that informs monolithic myth of ethnocentrism. Appearing as a 'billy-goat'

⁵⁰ Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*, Op cit, p394.

to the Police and Immigration Service, Saladin confirms their pre-judgements about illegal immigrants and generally corroborates images of racial stereotypes. The binary equation of us/them is reinforced by a politics of enmity which functions to exclude the Other. For the recently upper-class Saladin, this racial tension is as foreign as his new 'Packy' label: '[w]hat puzzled Chamcha was that a circumstance that struck him as utterly bewildering and unprecedented - that is, his metamorphosis into this supernatural imp - was being treated by the others as the most banal and familiar matter they could imagine' (158). He is led to the reassuring conclusion that, "'this isn't England". How could it be, after all; where in all that moderate and common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events as these might plausibly transpire?' (158)

Saladin's suffering, in Rushdie's view, nonetheless describes an element of England; at least as it is experienced by its migrant population. For many years Rushdie has been an outspoken critic of the Thatcher government's treatment of immigrants, especially coloured immigrants. Hence the scene in the sanatorium indicates his use of *The Satanic Verses* as a platform for announcing his own critical views of current government policy. The sanatorium is supposedly an infirmary illegal immigrants are housed, but it is depicted in terms more befitting prisoners of war than hospital patients. Thus 'guards' and not nurses need to be 'bribed' to bring in a supply of peppermints, Saladin is considered an 'infiltrator' and a 'spy', and patients flee after hearing the 'approaching crunch of the guards' heavy boots' (169).

Within this military metaphor there is the suggestion of an English siege mentality; where inside England myths of cultural authenticity legislate for an exclusive community. Immigrants are seen as invaders that need to be either interned or repelled. This brings Saladin's naive conceptions about the pure conventionalist nature of English society into sharper focus. Hal Valance informs Saladin:

[y]ou've done well for a person of tinted persuasion. Let me tell you some facts. Within the last three months, we re-shot a peanut-butter poster because it researched better without the black kid in the background. We re-recorded a building society jingle because T'Chairman thought the singer sounded black, even though he was white as a sodding sheet. We were told by a major airline that we couldn't use blacks in their ads, even though they were actually employees of the airline (267).

England, too, displays the features of prejudice and exclusiveness prevalent in customary communities. They are more insidious, the text suggests, because their existence is masked by a purported eclecticism.

To further entrench this post-colonial message of ill-treatment and victimisation of immigrants, Rushdie has Saladin finally make his way to the Shandaar rooming-house. This is an establishment categorised as 'Bed and Breakfast', the type that:

borough councils were using more and more owing to the crisis in public housing, lodging five person families in one bedroom rooms, turning blind eyes to health and safety regulations, and claiming 'temporary accommodation' allowances from the central government (264).

This house, again, is part of 'the real world' of England, where maybe 'thirty temporary human beings, with little hope of ever being declared permanent' (264), are compelled to reside.

Although the text asks that the social commentary be given consideration, the seminal aspect of Saladin's experience is the breaking down of his monolithic myth of 'Englishness'. For all of Saladin's 'dreaming of the Queen, of making tender love to the Monarch ... the avatar of the State, [whom] he had chosen, joined with' (169), it becomes increasingly apparent that he can no longer sustain this myth of Englishness except in states akin to an 'unending delirium of the senses' (169). Thus Pamela's insecurities augment Saladin's brutally crushed belief in the infallibility of his father, suggesting that all absolute values and beliefs are spurious. The implication too is that the waking world of Britain is just like anywhere else. The 'immeasurable distance' from Indianness to Englishness is not so imposing in the light of Pamela's traumatic childhood and the abuse of the adult Saladin: England is no more utopia than India is dystopia.

It is important to note, however, that *The Satanic Verses* acknowledges the difficulty for the individual in coping with the multiplicity of the postmodern age, and likewise humanity's craving for the unifying attributes of absolute belief. The incident of Saladin's reverse mutation into human form, for example, demonstrates not only the human drive toward an absolute value, but also the enormous power inherent in such convictions. Here Saladin focuses in a jealous rage on the image of Gibreel Farishta, believing him to be 'Mister Perfecto, portrayer of gods, who always landed on his feet, was always forgiven his sins, loved, praised, adored' (294). This has the unexpected effect of

restoring him to his old shape, 'Mr Saladin Chamcha himself ... mother-naked but of entirely human aspect and proportions, *humanised* - is there any option but to conclude - by the fearsome concentration of his hate' (294).

Possibly this episode reinforces the notion that 'evil may not be as far beneath our surface as we like to say it is. That is, in fact, we fall toward it naturally, that is, not against our natures' (427). But I would contend that to illuminate this quotation fully requires further consideration of the relationship between Gibreel and Saladin. After their miraculous escape from the *Bostan* disaster the pair undergo a dual physical metamorphosis. I have already examined Saladin's metamorphosis from the perspective that racial prejudice can operate as self-fulfilling rhetoric, but there is another, more obvious, aspect to his characterisation. The 'side effects' from falling such a distance were that,

one man's breath was sweetened, while another's, by an equal and opposite mystery, was soured. And around the edges of Gibreel Farishta's head, as he stood with his back to the dawn [could] be discerned a faint but distinctly golden, glow. And were those bumps, at Chamcha's temples, under his sodden and still-in-place bowler hat? And, and, and. (133)

The foul breath and bumps on the side of Saladin's head (the embryonic set of horns that will later be so imposing) are traditionally diabolic characteristics, while Gibreel's halo is exclusively angelic.

The personification of these polarities could clearly allow Rushdie to comment on the dramatic tension between good and evil in the novel, but this path is resisted by the author. Instead, as James Harrison notes, the concomitant presence of angelic and diabolic impulses in both characters, 'demonstrates little about the nature of good and evil other than what would appear to be the resounding cliché that they overlap, interpenetrate, and can be mistaken for one another'.⁵¹ Although this apparent lack of conclusive interpretation has troubled some critics,⁵² when viewed in terms of Rushdie's attack on monolithic myths, a cogent interpretation presents itself. The key to this interpretation lies in an overtly didactic passage in chapter seven:

[s]hould we even say that there are two fundamentally different types of self? Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-name and performances; and in

⁵¹ Harrison, James. *Salman Rushdie* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p98.

⁵² *Ibid*, p95.

spite of born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses; - has wished to remain, to a large degree, continuous, that is joined to and arising from his past; - that he chose neither near fatal illness nor transmuting fall; that, in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be, so that his is a self we may describe as 'true' ... whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention; his preferred revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, 'false'? (427)

In Rushdie's terms, what is 'true' and good about Gibreel is his eclectic approach to the construction of identity. He is able to write a myth of self that fuses the best attributes of both Indian and English, East and West, into a unified whole. As a corollary, Saladin's betrayal of his heritage can only be seen as 'false' and evil.

To re-examine the earlier quotation centring on Saladin's hatred for Gibreel, it becomes evident that Saladin is jealous. Jealous, that is, of Gibreel's outwardly coherent identity in the face of his own disintegration of self. Saladin is embittered by Gibreel precisely because the actor succeeds *as an Indian*. From the outset, Saladin perceives in Gibreel the banality that to his mind defines India, for, 'like Zeenat Vakil, Gibreel had reacted with mirth to Saladin's abbreviated name ... and had a way of failing to notice when he made people angry' (83). Saladin has spent his life purging himself of the Indian in him, being a creature of 'selected discontinuities', and his hatred projected onto Gibreel is symptomatic of that process. To invalidate Gibreel's person is for Saladin a validation of himself and his desire to recapture that pure and absolute myth of Englishness. The fierce concentration of hate that is sufficient to expunge the doubts that assail him about his myth, and return him at least momentarily to human form, is evidence of the enormous sway of fundamental belief.

To elaborate on this question of fundamental belief, however, requires us to leave Saladin and return to the character of Gibreel Farishta, for in his experiences lie the quintessential exemplars of the power of absolute myths. We last visited Gibreel at his hospital bed where he lay plagued by the suspicion that his cries to Allah were words lost to thin air. Thus, after a miraculous recovery that he decides was devoid of divine intervention, Gibreel determines to purge himself of the need for a God by proving his non-existence. 'Don't you get it?', he shouts after Alleluia Cone, 'No thunderbolt. That's the point'. Her retort, '[y]ou got your life back. *That's* the point' (30), becomes the

very challenge, '*change your life or did you get it back for nothing*' (31), that Gibreel cannot resist.

Much of Gibreel's life has died along with his faith. Myth is fundamental to his character, and despite the signing of movie contracts and an attempt to go back to work ('just because he'd lost his belief didn't mean he couldn't do his job'), it is unsurprising that 'one morning, a wheel chair stood empty and he had gone' (31). For Gibreel, the loss of religious myth signals the loss of his Indian life and the need to move on. The point is made explicit in the text:

[w]hy did he leave?

Because of her, the challenge of her, the newness, the fierceness of the two of them together, the inexorability of an impossible thing that was insisting on its right to become.

And, or maybe: because after he ate the pigs the retribution began, a nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams (32).

The challenge of Alleluia Cone, the 'her' in this passage, is also the challenge of the West. The England where Allie lives contains the novelty for Gibreel that informs the intensity between them, 'the inexorability of an impossible thing that was insisting on its right to become'. Significantly for Rushdie's project of examining the effects of multiculturalism in his adopted homeland, England is also a predominantly secular country where an absolute Muslim faith becomes especially vulnerable to conflict. A collapse of faith and its repercussions, Gibreel's 'nocturnal retribution', are thus appropriately explored in an English context.

Gibreel's shattering of one myth with the pigs, a myth that was intrinsic to his character, forces him to reconstitute his being and find meaning in another myth. That myth is his overpowering love for Alleluia Cone: '[h]e had no words to express her, his woman of mountain ice, to express how it had been in that moment when his life had been in pieces at his feet and she had become its meaning' (85). At first it appears that Gibreel may succeed, for although his return to Allie was shocking, 'taking her breath away with the impossibility of his being there at all', there was, 'at long last, love' (301).

Yet sadly for their nascent love, the shocks are only beginning. As Allie witnesses Gibreel's tormented sleep, she is unaware that the thrashing of his arms and the tortured whisperings that escape his lips are symptomatic of a serious mental deterioration. Gibreel is unable to

prevent the dreams that infect his sleep; the dreams that cast him in the role of the angel Gibreel and relocate him spatially and temporally to bear witness to, and even participate in, the development of Islam. The dream chapters themselves represent an investigation of the nature of fundamental myths, in this instance the religion of Islam. At this point, however, I shall continue to explore how Gibreel attempts to recreate himself under the mental stress that his loss of faith has caused him.

To re-aggregate himself, Gibreel attempts to substitute Alleluia for God as his centre,⁵³ to invent her as 'someone worth rushing out of one's old life to love' (314). Like Saladin's preoccupation with Pamela, this myth is so all-consuming as to become monolithic in nature. As such, it crumbles when exposed to even the slightest flaw, and given that these flaws are self-evident in Gibreel's relationship with Allie from the outset, it seems doomed to failure. For Allie the flaw is that her secret fear (love) is also her secret desire. She is thus prone to 'hit violently out at the very person whose devotion she sought the most' (315). For Gibreel, it is his 'overweening possessiveness and jealousy' toward Allie, and his 'imminent realisation - or, if you will, *insane idea*, that he was nothing less than ... the Angel of the Recitation' (315).

Despite this difficulty with their relationship, Gibreel is still committed to realising his wholeness in the monolithic, and the events that litter his descent into paranoid schizophrenia demonstrate this. Consider, for example, the incident in the chapter entitled "A City Visible But Unseen", where Gibreel soars through the sky as the Angel of the Recitation, meditating on the 'moral fuzziness' of the English. This, he decides,

is meteorologically induced. 'When the day is not warmer than the night', he reasoned, 'when the light is not brighter than the dark, when the land is not drier than the sea, then clearly a people will lose the power to make distinctions, and commence to see everything - from political parties to sexual partners to religious beliefs - as much-the-same, nothing-to-choose, give-or-take. What folly! For truth is extreme, it is *so* and not *thus*, it is *him* and not *her*, a partisan matter, not a spectator sport. It is, in brief, *heated*. City', he cried, and his voice rolled out over the metropolis like thunder, 'I am going to tropicalize you' (354).

The subjectivity that calls into question the reach of morality, rendering it an equivocal concept at best, is here translated into an absolute principle by Gibreel. As such, morality becomes quantifiable and a certain weight and efficacy attaches to it.

⁵³ For further discussion on this centring impulse, see Derrida, Jacques. *Op cit*, pp108-14.

This is evidenced by Gibreel's immediate enumeration of the benefits of his proposed metamorphosis of London into a tropical city. He cites:

increased moral definition, development of vivid and expansive patterns of behaviour among the populace, higher quality popular music ... A new mass market for domestic air-conditioning units, ceiling fans, anti-mosquito coils and sprays. Hot water bottles to be banished forever, replaced in the foetid nights by the making of slow and odorous love. Disadvantages: cholera, typhoid, legionnaires' disease, dust, noise, a culture of excess. Standing up on the horizon, spreading his arms to fill up the sky, Gibreel cried: 'let it be' (355).

Although the tone is parodic, once again there is a recognition of the desire of the individual to simplify the 'white noise' of existence by reducing it to an absolute. Rushdie also acknowledges the power contained in a totalising concept in the fact that London does experience a heatwave. 'Listen, isn't this weather something?', asks Alicja Cone of her daughter Allie, 'they say it could last months' (356).

Harrison suggests that the boundaries between magic and realism are blurred, one leaking into another, to illustrate how Gibreel's dreams spill into his waking life.⁵⁴ This interpretation is useful to the extent that it makes the linkage between mental deterioration and the magical nature of reality. But I would argue that the central function of this passage is rather to highlight Gibreel's desperate need to recapture his faith in the absolute. Gibreel's desire for a totalising myth to interpret and integrate his life surfaces in his magical experiences as the angel, and because of this these experiences suggest, in their vivid and often frightening reality, that monolithic myth can seem fantastic yet still have viability as an ordering device for self and society. The crucial ingredient is belief: monolithic myth is only sustained by uncompromised adherence.

Gibreel's crisis is that he cannot live with the conflicting messages that feed his doubt, or purge himself of his doubt to recapture the absolute. In the same way that this tension causes Gibreel to lose his mind, the tensions between he and Allie cause them to lose control of their emotions. They slip into a series of self-agonising arguments that result in Gibreel storming out from, or being ordered out of, Allie's house, only to be consistently drawn back by a 'homing instinct: one crazy heading for another' (356). Even when Gibreel resolves to return

⁵⁴ Harrison, James. *Op cit*, p103.

to Bombay, 'in the hope that he never has to see [Allie], or [Saladin], or this damn cold city, again in what remains of my life' (538), Alleluia Cone unexpectedly follows.

Until the climax there seems hope that Gibreel might be able to negotiate his crisis by substituting myths: if it is not spiritual myth then it must be secular myth; if not God then Allie. This return, however, is ultimately ill-fated. Coming hard on the heels of several movie disasters, and his mind in a virtual state of collapse, Gibreel murders Allie. Trying to explain his actions toward her later, Gibreel is virtually incoherent,

I heard verses
 You get me Spoono
 V e r s e s
 Rosy apple lemon tart
 I like coffee I like tea
 Violets are blue roses are red remember me when I am
 dead dead dead
 I didn't push her
 Rekha pushed her
 Bloody hell
 I loved that girl (544-5).

Given that the image of Rehka is a figment of Gibreel's overworked imagination, we must conclude that he finally pushed Allie, as he himself is pushed by the verses, 'over the edge'.

A harbinger to his suicide in front of Saladin are the words: 'I told you a long time back ... that if I thought the sickness would never leave me, that it would always return, I would not be able to bear up to it' (546). In his attempt to make himself whole, to fill the gap left by the monolithic myth of God, Gibreel fails. His own experience tells us that doubt, that staple of the 'the human condition' (90), precludes life within the comfort of the absolute.

This is particularly evident in the dream sequences which consciously hurl doubt not at the comprehensive range of Islamic belief, but at the *fundamentalist* dogma of Islam. In Gibreel's first dream, for instance, he is returned to the era of the birth of Islam where, yielding to 'his old weakness for taking on too many roles' (108), he finds himself not simply a spectator to the events, but an active participant in them. This begins when Mahommed, or 'Mahound' as he is labelled in the text, falls into a trance-like sleep, and feels:

a dragging pain his gut, like something trying to be born, and now Gibreel, who has been hovering-above-looking-down, feels a confusion, *who am I*, in these moments it begins to seem that the archangel is *actually inside the prophet*, I am the dragging in the gut, I am the archangel being extruded from the sleeper's navel ... not possible to say which of us is dreaming the other (110).

The confusion caused by the identity crisis - Gibreel being unsure as to whether he is the prophet, dreamed by the prophet, or vice versa - is exacerbated when Mahound:

strains with all his might ... and Gibreel begins to feel that strength that force, here it is at my own jaw working it ... Not my voice I'd never know such words, I'm no classy speaker ... Nevertheless, here they are: the Words. Being God's postman is no fun, Yaar. Butbutbut: God isn't in this picture. God knows whose postman I've been (112).

In these two passages Rushdie casts doubt over the core fundamentalist principles on which Islamic belief is predicated. Gibreel's bewilderment over his identity and the emphasis on being first 'inside' Mahound and then 'extruded' from the prophet, suggests that the archangel is born of, or at least is an extension of, Mahound. In positing that the vision of the archangel could be engendered by Mahound, Rushdie challenges the archangel's role as 'messenger' in the myth of Islam. While this is not a conclusive denial of the archangel's presence, disbelief is after all 'too final' (90), any doubt for fundamentalists is sufficient to bring the whole mythical edifice crumbling down. The conviction that the Qu'ran is God's word entrusted to Muhammed unaltered by the archangel Gibreel - an enduring statement of the nature and purpose of the divine mind - must be unqualified and unswerving. God's absence from the 'picture', then, inflicts a further wound on the doctrine of the Recitation by again questioning the source of the Word and Mahound's exclusive access to the divine mind.

The doubt surrounding the satanic verses episode in the text parallels the doubt experienced by the character Mahound. The proposition of the Grandee of Jahilia, Abu Simbel, that Islam should accommodate three female Gods (Lat, Manat, and Uzza) in return for religious toleration, and even official recognition of Islam in Jahilia, leaves Mahound troubled. Despite his assertion that, 'it's a small matter ... a grain of sand', Mahound's wife Hamza 'sees the exhaustion in him. As if he had been wrestling with a demon' (105).

At first the demon asserts itself as Mahound announces his acceptance of the Grandee's offer with the words; '[t]hey [Lat, Manat and Uzza] are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed' (114). Later, however, Mahound's doubt causes him anguish, and he marches off to Mount Cone to seek corroboration of Allah's conciliatory decision. This requires a second meeting with Allah's intermediary Gibreel, during which prophet and archangel 'wrestled for hours or even weeks' (123). The passage is narrated by the dreaming Gibreel, and is couched in the language of combat. Mahound:

throws the fight ... it's what he wanted, it was his will filling me up and giving the strength to hold him down ... so the moment I got on top of him he starts weeping for joy and then he did his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again, made it pour all over him, like sick (123).

At the conclusion of this 'wrestling match', Mahound revives more quickly than usual, filled with the urgency of his news. "It was the Devil", he says aloud to the empty air, making it true by giving it voice. "The last time, it was Shaitan". "The verses I memorised ... were not the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly, but satanic' (123). Gibreel alone sees the flaw: '*it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me*' (123).

For Mahound, this revelation crushes his doubt and returns him, as indeed he wishes to be returned, to the security of the absolute. 'God cannot be four ... God is one' (107). Yet Gibreel's insistence that it was him both times, that Mahound is fooling himself, suggests that in reality doubt still exists. In spite of Mahound's attempt to 'expunge the foul verses that reek of brimstone and sulphur, to strike them from the record for ever and ever, so they will survive in just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions and orthodox interpreters will try and unwrite their story' (123), the verses resurface in a novel that seems to rejoice in their very existence.

What also of the blasphemy of Salman(?) the scribe who scrupulously takes down the word of God, as expounded by Mahound, until suddenly afflicted with doubt himself.

After that, when he sat at the Prophet's feet, writing down rules rules rules, he began, surreptitiously, to change things. 'Little things at first ... then I changed a bigger thing. Here's the point: Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was ... polluting the word of God with my own profane language (367).

These examples beg the question surely; why the dogged insistence on doubt in this episode?

The answer, I would suggest, lies in Rushdie's wholesale rejection of totalising principles as a charter for existence. From this perspective, the dream sequences together amount to a meditation on the inadequacies of the monolithic form of myth. The essential difference between the two is laid bare in chapter five with the question:

WHAT KIND OF IDEA ARE YOU? *Are you the kind that compromises, does deals, accommodates itself to society, aims to find a niche, to survive; or are you the cussed, bloody-minded, ramrod-backed type of damnfool notion that would break rather than sway with the breeze? - The kind that will almost certainly, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, be smashed to bits; but the hundredth time, will change the world* (355).

In his belated rejection of the Grandee's proposal, Mahound announces himself and Islam to be the inflexible, unyielding kind of idea. This is his ultimate response to Hind's chiding:

[y]ou miss the point. If you are for Allah, I am for Al-Lat. And yours is a patronising, condescending lord. Al-Lat hasn't the slightest wish to be his daughter. Between Allah and the Three there can be no peace. I don't want it. I want the fight. To the death; that is the kind of idea I am. What kind are you? (121).

In the chapters entitled 'Ayesha' and 'The Parting of the Red Sea', Rushdie places this monolithic myth of Islam under further scrutiny. In the first section of 'Ayesha', Gibreel is 'conjured up' by the exiled Iman, who lives in his 'rented flat ... the waiting-room' (207-11), dreaming of triumphant return to his homeland of Desh. 'He is pure force', the reader is told, 'an elemental being', whose desire it is 'not only to revolt against a tyrant, but against history' (210). For history is 'the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies - progress, science, rights - because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Allah finished his revelation to Mahound' (210).

The tone of unflinching resolve is duplicated by Ayesha later in the same chapter. Her proclamation subsequent to a vision of the Archangel Gibreel: '[g]reatness has come among us. Everything will be required of us and everything will be given to us also' (225), is motivation enough for hundreds to undertake a task as formidable as the

Iman's. 'It is the angel's will', Ayesha informs the bewildered villagers, 'that all of us ... prepare for a pilgrimage. We are commanded to walk from this place to Mecca Sharif' (235). To the protest that 'there is a mighty ocean between us and Mecca Sharif', Ayesha produces a response as rooted in blind faith as her initial proposal. 'When we reach the shores of the sea, we will put our feet into the foam, and the waters will open for us' (236).

The journey itself is narrated in the later chapter, 'The Parting of the Arabian Sea', where it is portrayed as a true test of faith. As the pilgrims die by the roadside, their faith is sorely tested. The watershed is the proposal by Mirza Saeed, a businessman who has followed the orphan girl Ayesha for fear of missing a profound spiritual experience, but whose residual doubt is registered by his preference for a Mercedes-Benz automobile over the spirit-breaking drudgery of walking. His voice recalls that of Abu Simbel in the satanic verses episode when he seeks compromise from Ayesha. 'We have interests in common, you and I', he starts, following quickly with the substance of his offer; '[w]e propose to fly you and Mishal, and let's say ten - twelve! - of the villagers, to Mecca. Then, truly, you will have performed a miracle for some instead of none' (499).

Ayesha's answer is delivered at dawn following a nocturnal consultation with the archangel: 'It is all of us, or none' (500). The narrator notes:

[h]is offer had contained an old question: What kind of idea are you? And she, in turn, had offered him an old answer. I was tempted, but am renewed; am uncompromising; absolute; pure (500).

Unlike Mahound's 'one in a hundred' absolute idea that changes the world, Ayesha's is 'smashed to bits'. The villagers reach and finally rush into the ocean, 'splashing about, falling over, getting up, moving forwards, toward the horizon' (502), with only the five who doubted left shrieking in the shallows.

It is not so much the narrative that is of particular interest here, as what these chapters say about the 'ramrod-backed ideas' of the Iman and Ayesha. The Iman's vision, feeding off fundamentalist Muslim doctrine, is defined by intolerance and a lack of flexibility. It reviles other cultures and seeks to retain that which Rushdie is at great pains to deny ever existed: purity.

The curtains, thick golden velvet, are kept shut all day, because otherwise the evil thing might creep up into the apartment: foreignness, Abroad, the alien nation. When he leaves ... it will be a point of pride to be able to say that he remained in complete ignorance of the sodom in which he had been obliged to wait; ignorant, and therefore unsullied, unaltered, pure (206-7).

The repeated linkage of the words 'ignorance' and 'pure' in this passage are significant, for it gives an insight into their relationship in the novel. The text suggests that ignorance based on a suspect monolithic myth like fundamentalist Islam is destructive. To draw the curtains on the outside world is not to change that reality; it merely substitutes a surrogate reality which rests on a simplistic set of assumptions about the world. The placebo, Rushdie suggests, is worse than the bitter pill. The black-and-white purity of the fundamentalist world-view is based on rigid categorisation, demarcation, and even racism. All are appalling to Rushdie, for whom cultural miscegenation is the only legitimate response to the complexity which defines the post-modern experience.

The text reiterates how such inflexibility is also destructive in a wider context. As with Mahound, Gibreel is powerless with the Iman: "[y]ou don't need me", Gibreel emphasises. "The revelation is complete. Let me go". The other shakes his head, *tonight's the night ... and you must fly me to Jerusalem*' (212). Gibreel argues, but the Iman leaps on the archangel's back in a single movement, and Gibreel 'feels himself rising into the sky' (212). Swooping into Jerusalem, the Iman speaks, his 'voice hang[ing] in the sky: "Come down. I will show you love"'. In the streets the people are packed so densely that, 'they have blended into a larger, composite entity, relentless, serpentine'. Slowly they walk up the slope toward the guns; 'seventy at a time, they come into range; the guns babble, and they die, and then the next seventy climb over the bodies of the dead'. And in the dark doorways of the city mothers push their beloved sons into the parade; *'go, be a martyr, do the needful, die'* (213).

In this interchange, the Iman reveals that the power to compel people to do his will, even if it means their certain death is bestowed by absolute principles. Here is the power of the monolithic translated into human terms. 'Human beings who turn away from God lose love, and certainty, and also the sense of His boundless time', the Iman states. 'We long for the eternal, and I am eternity. She is nothing: a tick, or tock' (214). In their insecurity, their loss of certainty and need for

eternity, the message is repeated: people crave the strength of the absolute. But because a myth of this nature has an innate destructive potential, it is rejected by Rushdie as being too filled with 'vengeance, power, duty, rules and hate' (216).

The Iman's narrative is thus thrown into sharper relief by the story of Ayesha. While this story sounds a warning that it is easy to delude oneself with religion, and that in the inevitable failure of the mission such belief is fraught with danger, it also inspires a sense of optimism. First, through the pilgrimage the villagers were granted meaning in their lives, and died happy, if somewhat deluded. Secondly, that all the survivors testified to seeing the Arabian Sea actually part suggests there is a strength in mythical belief.

It is in the amazing experience of Mirza Saeed, though, that there appears a true hope for mankind. An uncounted passage of days after returning to his village, Mirza is close to death. On his final night, however, he is visited by Ayesha, who once again offers him the hope of redemption: '[o]pen wide! You've come this far, now do the rest'. Finally Mirza overcomes his doubt, 'and at the moment of [his] opening the waters parted, and they walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian sea' (507).

What is being highlighted in this example, as with the satanic verses incident, Gibreel's life, and much of Saladin's life, is that doubt itself is not a binary proposition. Just as it is suggested that there is wisdom in a cautious approach to an absolute myth, this does not, and indeed cannot, equate to a wholesale dismissal. For myth as an ordering principle has enormous weight, and is necessary to order life for the individual and society. To deny this is to suffer the fate of Gibreel. Alternatively, to cede oneself wholly to a binary myth is to risk destruction either at the hands of the intolerance of the belief itself, as with the Iman, or when doubt assails the belief, as with Gibreel.

The call is for an eclectic and provisional mythology that has a certain weight and materiality, but without destructive or totalising characteristics. Part of this principle is illustrated in Mahound's clemency when he vanquished his religious rivals. When first asked the question, 'what kind of idea are you?', Mahound responds absolutely: 'I was tempted, but am renewed; unsullied, pure'. In the later chapter 'Return to Jahilia', however, Mahound is asked the same question, and this time he responds forgivingly: 'Mahound has promised that anyone

within the Grandee's walls will be spared. So come in, all of you, and bring your families, too' (371).

In this narrative, then, there is a plea. It is a plea for tolerance. In one sense this recalls Gibreel's early myth of self. The text suggests that a weak idea can be shored up by an uncompromising assertion of purity, but when it becomes strong there exists a need for multiplicity. For in narrow customary communities where cultural miscegenation is unusual, a monolithic myth structure is a useful device for ensuring the survival of the community. In post-modern communities, however, society is too complex and heterogeneous to sustain the politics of exclusion which grow out of monolithic myths: down this path, Rushdie suggests, lies only alienation and destruction.

It is pertinent, then, to consider how the individual constitutes an eclectic myth of self. This is ultimately illustrated in Saladin's experience. Initially committed to his myth of Englishness, Saladin has seen this steadily descend into a state of entropy. The turning point for him is the terminal illness of his father, as Saladin realises 'old emotions were sending tentacles out to grasp him' (514). Suddenly, words become contaminated with this emotion and take on strange meanings: 'only a few days ago', Saladin realises, '*back home* would have rung false' (514). Saladin is beginning the transition back to Salahuddin.

This 'process of renewal, of regeneration' (534), that first began with his father's forgiveness and then with his death, seems completed by Zeeny's re-entry into his life. 'His old English life, its bizarreries, its evils, now seemed very remote, even irrelevant. "About time, too", Zeeny approves, "now you can stop acting at last"' (534). Newly committed to his Indianness, Salahuddin resolves to think about himself '*as living perpetually in the first day of the future*' (535).

The recreation of a myth of Indianness, forged from a nostalgia for childhood and the warm glow of a father's forgiveness, is yet too absolute to be free from aporias. It harkens back to an earlier myth of Englishness, that because of its denial of history, of culture, and of identity, was always doomed to failure. Rushdie makes the point explicit: 'a history is not so easily shaken off; Salahuddin [is] also living, after all, in the *present moment of the past*' (535). Salahuddin's realisation of this paradox is in the final lines of the novel: '[h]e shook his head; he could no longer believe in fairy tales. Childhood was over, and the view from the window was no more than an old and sentimental

echo. Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born' (547).

His heritage, Indian and English, is composed of lingering presences that must be reconciled to each other to form a myth of self. Parts of the old will die, and parts of the new will be assimilated, but neither will be denied. While it is important, then, to value the myths that write us at any given moment, it is equally important to realise that 'nothing is forever; that no cure ... is complete' (540). Salahuddin's new myth of self is dynamic, self-determined and tolerant: precisely the features required for personal survival in the multiplicity of the post-modern community. Rushdie thus places himself firmly beyond the post-modern by addressing a perceived need for cultural specificity and, at the same time, by allowing for a provisional mythology whose tolerance denies the monolithic.

The message, finally, is one of eclecticism. Just as one cannot repudiate history, it is also impossible to deny the inexorable march into the future. The myths that give coherence to society must therefore be sufficiently flexible to allow the new to be born. A world that is becoming increasingly accessible and hybridised needs to be constructed without the destructive intolerance of the absolute. For a man that has made a foreign land his home, who has learned to embrace hybridity, this can be the only honest *Weltanschauung*. In this, I believe, Hanif Johnson's words could well be Rushdie's own: '*The world is real. We have to live in it; we have to live here, to live on*' (469).

Michael Ondaatje.

The Myth(s) of Nation: *The English Patient.*

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, his *Researches* are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements of both our own and other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict.

Herodotus, *The Histories*.

Michael Ondaatje presents the four central characters in his novel *The English Patient* against a backdrop of well documented history, namely the allied advance northward on the Italian peninsula during World War II. Each differs radically in age, experience, culture, and value systems, yet all have been fundamentally affected by the conflict that rages around them. Their stories, recounted piecemeal to each other from aching, scarred memories, cautiously massaged back to health at the Villa San Girolamo, form the body of the novel. And within each story there is the familiar pain of betrayal and loss, the genesis for which is the incoherence issuing from war.

This very setting and structure of the narrative lends itself to what could be termed Ondaatje's 'mythical' focus. Sharing Haskell Block's opinion that, 'the anarchy of the twentieth century culture is the groundwork of personal myth',⁵⁵ Ondaatje has reduced his scope from a 'century' of anarchy to a particularly critical 'moment'. *The English Patient* examines the concept of nation, and further challenges the sense of obligation or duty generated by nation. These, Ondaatje seems to believe, are residual concepts from a humanist tradition that sought stable moral and aesthetic values. In contrast to this decidedly modernist stance, Ondaatje, like Linda Hutcheon, seems to believe that,

[w]hat is important in all these internalised challenges to humanism is the interrogating of the notion of consensus. Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgment of differences.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Block, Haskell M. "The Myth of the Artist". *Literary Criticism and Myth: Yearbook of Comparative Criticism*, Vol IX (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p18.

⁵⁶ Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. *Op cit*, p7.

The English Patient's interrogation of these totalising humanist values pivots on the idea that in extreme circumstances the nation can function as a monolithic myth.

Central to this idea is the assertion that the nation has no palpable existence outside the mythology, the symbolism, through which it is envisioned. As Michael Walzer puts it:

[t]he state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolised before it can be loved; imagined before it can be conceived.⁵⁷

Walzer recognises that the nation exists only in the minds of its citizens: it is a 'national imaginary' that must be personified, symbolised, and imagined to bring it into being. While the symbols of state are real - the government, the military, the flag - 'nation' per se is an ethereal concept that is made tangible for the individual by these symbols attached to it. It is myth that invests these symbols with power and weight.

The keystone of the nation-myth is that it exists, in the most part, as an uncritically accepted idea.

People subscribe to the *master fiction* that the world is divided into a number of mutually exclusive nations; they see these units as part of the nature of things, and assume an antiquity that nations in fact lack.⁵⁸

Nations possess a naturalness for people that disguises the fact that they are fashioned from ideologies. In terms of Barthes' theory, this is sufficient to create nation as myth. Each government or ruling body markets an agenda to its citizens which invokes myths that give its decisions and contingency plans the weight of precedent and the appearance of artlessness. Consider, for example, Margaret Thatcher's efforts to implement a free market economy in England. Her invocation of the free-market alludes to the 'land of the free' and 'free born Englishmen', which are customary national symbols and recall Shakespeare's *Henry V* and its endorsement of just such English archetypes.⁵⁹ Essentially, they are national myths reinforcing a myth of nation.

⁵⁷ Walzer, Michael. *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p17.

⁵⁸ Kertzer, D. *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p6.

⁵⁹ See, for example, the call to battle in III.i. 'And you, good yeomen, / Whose limbs were made in England, show us here / The mettle of your pasture; let us swear / That you are worth your breeding: which

Despite, or perhaps partly because of, its mythical form, the nation is a highly effective and innately functional apparatus of social cohesion.⁶⁰ This is because nation is also underpinned by anthropological and psychological qualities of myth. The stories we tell about ourselves to explain and order our world in a consistent and comprehensible way unifies the collective drama. The idea of the nation speaks directly to notions of community and identity. The readiness to identify with one's nation is an extension of the desire for group association which is exhibited in so many facets of social life. Social psychologist's report that an attachment to a national idea begins at an early age.

One of the first features of a child's political involvement is his sense of belonging to a political unit. The young child develops a sense of 'we' in relation to his own country and a sense of 'they' with respect to other countries. The child's first group identification is with his family, [and] feelings of membership in the larger national unit may be generalised from this early experience. The feeling of national loyalty is not only an individual covenant between the citizen and his country; it is also a bond guarded by considerable group pressures and sanctions.⁶¹

A politics of exclusion is inherent in this logic - in the we/they binary proposition - that augments feelings of belonging and identity. This binary tendency is exacerbated by the prospect of conflict; when the community is under threat and it requires unflinching solidarity for its very survival.

Richard Slotkin notes that, 'mythmaking is a reifying process, through which metaphorical descriptions of reality come to substitute for an apprehension of reality'.⁶² What is reified with the possibility of war is the sense of the national idea as being higher than that embodied in the everyday ordering of society. Thus,

the essence of the institution of the parochial state is the custom that calls on its citizens to give their lives for it in war, and this demand is psychologically

I do doubt not; / For there is none of you so mean and base, / That hath not lustre in your eyes'. Wells, Stanley and Taylor, Gary eds. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

60 Cf. Brennan, Timothy. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp2-6.

61 Hess, Robert, and Torney, Judith. *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967), pp26-8.

62 Slotkin, Richard. *Op cit*, p73.

possible so long as their country fills the whole of their mental horizon and appears to embrace the sum of things human and divine.⁶³

The state or nation must therefore be sacred,

in the way common objects serving a religious purpose, like the altar, the baptismal water or anything else of the kind are sacred. Everybody knows they are only material objects; but material objects which are regarded as sacred because they serve a sacred purpose.⁶⁴

As a 'sacred' idea that 'embraces the sum of things human and divine', nation is invested with the power to create itself as a monolithic myth. It imposes obligations and duties on its citizens to act not out of self interest but for the 'greater good'. A failure to comply commands, at the very least if we consider the ramifications of treason, the penalty of social disgrace and exclusion.

Before pressing on into novel, however, it is necessary to consider the terms 'duty' and 'greater good'. Even in the disciplines of Philosophy and Political Science where they are most often systematised, duty and greater good are elusive concepts, and it is fruitless here to engage in debate over their definition.⁶⁵ It is sufficient to note firstly that 'duty' consists of that 'which one ought to fulfil',⁶⁶ and the greater good of obedience to a principle 'of some good which is common to all the persons who owe obedience to it'.⁶⁷ Secondly, it is important to note that both terms are predicated on morality.⁶⁸

It is these broad senses of duty to the greater good which Ondaatje seeks to employ, but it is his own adaptation of the concept that is of particular interest here. In not explicitly addressing the State's right to declare or conscript for war, he elides the legal dimension of duty to the greater good in the novel. His characters all feel compelled by moral, not legal, obligations to go to war. That they still go to war speaks to the power of this duty to the national idea. It is in bypassing the recourse to legal means that Ondaatje imbues the duty to a common

63 Toynbee, A. *A Study of History: Universal States, Universal Churches* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p395.

64 Weil, Stefan. *The Need for Roots*, trans. A.F. Wills (London: Ark, 1987), p187.

65 Consider on the first point the chapter "Politics and Morals", in McPherson, Thomas. *Political Obligation* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1967), especially pages pp77-8. See also Plamenatz, J. P. *Consent, Freedom and Obligation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp62-81.

66 Clark, Stephen. *Civil Peace and Sacred Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p21.

67 Plamenatz, John. *Op Cit*, p62.

68 See McPherson, Thomas. *Op Cit*, p76.

good with a mythical quality that grants it power as a socio-cultural imperative.

It is this persuasiveness of the myths of obligation, and their 'naturalness' in the face of historical determination, that Ondaatje feels compelled to contest. His position is that of a 'New Internationalist',⁶⁹ one who has been displaced from his country of birth, one who writes from a multiplicity of perspectives. Ondaatje himself has stated, 'I'm someone who has moved around a lot in my life ... and so my sense of the world is one where there is a variety of landscapes and climates'.⁷⁰ This could plausibly explain why a sense of national identity for Ondaatje is ephemeral and provisional, and why the concept of 'nation' itself has been severely diminished in value.

Ondaatje's experience is not unique. In an increasingly hybridised world, the problems of imposing boundaries on conflicting or dissimilar cultural interests, the politics of inclusion and exclusion, are thrown into sharper focus. Rushdie indignantly explains:

we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage: which heritage includes both a Bradford-born Indian kid's right to be treated as a full member of British society; and also the right of any member of this post-diaspora community to draw on its roots for its art, just as all the world's community of displaced writers has always done.⁷¹

The demand by Rushdie is not simply for acceptance or assimilation, but for acknowledgment and celebration of difference. Just as Saladin and Gibreel each create a collage of self in *The Satanic Verses*, the many collages of self, 'located at the intersection of multiple communities, values, orientations, and ideologies among which are tensions, contradictions and negotiations',⁷² constitute the 'nation'. There is no escape from the clash of difference: like doubt in the post-modern age, it is quintessential to the human condition.

A problem for the projects of both Rushdie and Ondaatje, though, is that the myth of duty to the greater good is premised on the nation as transcendent. Inherent in this monolithic logic are the intolerant notions of cultural purity and origin that form the basis of cultural (and racial)

69 Strongman, Luke. *The Trans-Modern Author* (Canterbury University: Unpublished MA Thesis, 1993), p20.

70 Shapcott, Tom. 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje'. *Westerly* 27 (1) 1982, p65.

71 Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. *Op cit*, P15.

72 Slaughter, Michael. "The Salman Rushdie Affair: Apostasy, Honor, and Freedom of Speech". *Virginia Law Review* 79 (153) 1993, p202.

exclusion. Difference is systematically expunged through cultural binarism; so much so that, to use Rushdie's words, there is no room for an identity that 'is at once plural and partial ... sometimes stradd[ling] two cultures; at other times, fall[ing] between two stools'.⁷³ Rather, identity is constituted in terms of the group, where solidarity and mutual assistance are guaranteed by self-effacement to the ideal of the group.⁷⁴ The erasure of aspects of the self is possible if the personal anxieties these aspects once addressed - identity, place, and community - are salved within the national imaginary. 'Expressions of absolute faith in, and loyalty to, the national idea thus appear to be:

realistic and rational judgments because they are shared by many members of the same group. This consensus succeeds in transforming fantasy into reality, since for most people reality is constituted by general consensus and not based on reason or critical examination.⁷⁵

Duty to the national idea becomes uncritically or even unknowingly accepted as within the natural order of things. Reality is then an arrangement of obligatory relationships, an almost total privileging of communal over personal, national over local, and general over particular. Consistent with his post-colonial project, Ondaatje views such restraints as reductive and, ultimately, destructive.

The composition of the narrative addresses this tension between the dichotomies above. The recounting of the characters' respective pasts to each other is, on the broad canvas, a means of redressing the elisions of recorded *public* history, a means of articulating silence. In Brian McHale's terms, Ondaatje writes 'apocryphal history': history that 'attempts to redress the balance of the historical record ... by juxtaposing the officially-accepted version of what happened, with another, often radically dissimilar version of the world'.⁷⁶ Like Herodotus in *The Histories*, Ondaatje 'has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument'.⁷⁷

⁷³ Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. *Op cit*, p15.

⁷⁴ Peristiany, Jean. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p210.

⁷⁵ Fromm, Eric. *Op cit*, p230.

⁷⁶ McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p90.

⁷⁷ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1993), p110. All further references to this edition will be contained parenthetically in the body of the text. In chapters other than that pertaining specifically to *The English Patient*, the parentheses will contain the abbreviation *TEP*.

Ondaatje's 'supplementary' method is to provide the human flesh on the skeleton of historical fact, a narrative thrust foreshadowed by *The English Patient's* enigmatic epigraph:

Most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katherine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura.

I cannot begin this meeting tonight without referring very sympathetically to those tragic occurrences.

The lecture this evening...

From the minutes of the
Geographical Society meeting
of November 194-, London

In the recorded history of the minutes, the human element is apparently dismissed as incidental. Yet for Ondaatje it is crucial. 'This was the way Madox spoke to other geographers at Kensington Gore', *The English Patient* informs the reader. 'But you do not find adultery in the minutes of the Geographical Society. Our room never appears in the detailed reports which chartered every knoll and every incident of history' (145). Ondaatje is clearly uninterested in 'histories' of purely verifiable fact, preferring instead 'the cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history - how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love' (119).

In his attempt to re-animate the human dimension of World War II, Ondaatje constructs a microcosm of the Villa San Girolamo in which he unites the four central characters. In this small sanctuary, where they are 'protected by the simple fact that the villa seemed a ruin' (14), Hana, the patient, Kip and Caravaggio unwittingly illustrate the impact of the war on humanity through their diversity and dislocation. In their varied ages, from the 'half adult and half child' (14) Hana to the aged English patient; and again in their multiple national backgrounds - Canadian, Hungarian and Indian - these characters evidence the indiscriminate destructive power of global conflict.

The physical and emotional demands of the war has left the four personalities not only traumatised, but more saliently in Ondaatje's eyes, profoundly and terminally disillusioned: disillusioned, that is, with the grand myths of duty which once inspired them. When the reader encounters Hana, the young Canadian woman who nurses *The English Patient*, her mental and physical distress map on her body the disastrous impact of the Italian campaign. 'She was thin, mostly from tiredness,

[but] always hungry, her face ... tougher and leaner' (50). During the time at the Villa San Girolamo, the narrator informs us, Hana was 'twenty years old and mad and unconcerned with safety' (13), living only for herself and her patient. 'She would not be ordered again to carry out duties for the greater good. She would care only for the burned patient' (14).

Hana's sense of communal obligation that was sufficient to carry her to the Italian peninsula, has passed away like so many of the soldiers 'coming in with just bits of their bodies ... then dying' (83). Kip, the young sapper who is posted at the Villa, 'knows the depth of darkness in her, her lack ... of faith' (271). It is in Hana's resolution to care only for The English Patient, irrespective of any other military duties, that one finds the reason why her faith has collapsed. In the face of the atrocities she has reluctantly witnessed, the myth of duty to the greater good has lost its moral force. The metaphorical descriptions of reality which seem to have led Hana toward the war - the myths of nation, like duty, honour, and service to the country - are stripped of their lustre by death.

Caravaggio, in a morphine-induced soliloquy, articulates the questions that stem from this loss of faith.

The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in Orchards, for God's sake? What is he doing fighting English wars? A farmer on the western front cannot prune a tree without ruining his saw. Why? Because of the amount of shrapnel shot into it during the last war. Even the trees are thick with the diseases we brought. The armies indoctrinate you and leave you here and they fuck off somewhere else to cause trouble, inky-dinky parlez-vous' (122).

Caravaggio's first observation that the group at the Villa have no vested interest in the war draws attention to the fraternal bonds between nations. Yeatman notes that within the nation itself:

the sovereign state is accorded the masculine role of protecting the motherland or mother country. Men become brothers in their duty of sacrifice on behalf of military of the motherland (*LID*, 210).

These observations also hold true for international relationships, especially imperialism and its offspring, the 'British Commonwealth'. The glue that bonds the nations together in this community is nostalgic colonialism. All the nations embraced by this concept, regardless of whether they are under direct threat from the war in Europe, become

'brothers in arms' to achieve a greater good: the protection of the 'mother-country', England. Caravaggio's disgust stems from his realisation that the defence of the motherland serves not to preserve the greater good but merely to fortify colonial rhetoric.

Caravaggio's second point is that the mindless repetition of war questions its very validity as a means of resolving conflict. Recall Thomas Pynchon in my introduction, where he suggests World War I seems little more than practise for World War II. Yet the Canadian thief is clear as to why war is presented as an effective answer to national tension:

[i]t's only the rich who can't afford to be smart. They're compromised. They got locked years ago into privilege. They have to protect their belongings ... They have to follow the rules of their shitty civilised world. They declare war, they have honour, they can't leave. But you two. We three. We're free (122).

The myth of nation and greater good are cited for jingoistic ends by those with a vested interest in preserving the state. That is to say, those who are 'privileged', those who have 'belongings'. These few, Caravaggio believes, are people who seek to glorify the concepts of nation and the greater good for their own ends.

Certainly Caravaggio's sense of alienation from the privileged classes is strong. He is the thief from *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje's novel prior to *The English Patient*, notable for his dramatic escape from prison by painting himself blue to blend with the surroundings.⁷⁸ Although it is not explicitly stated in *The English Patient*, Caravaggio's tone suggests that despite his outsider status as a criminal in Toronto society, he nevertheless felt that he had something valuable to contribute to the war effort.

In the extreme circumstances of war, commitment to the national myth is the basic prerequisite for inclusion in the drama. The desperate need for solidarity can compel the nation to forgive a thief and even offer him or her a socially sanctioned role. Conversing with *The English Patient* late in the novel, Caravaggio admits, '[t]hieves like us ... were legitimized. We stole. Then we began to advise' (253). Furthermore, to Hana's charge at the Villa, 'by the way, I think this is called looting', Caravaggio replies: 'my country taught me all this, it's what I did for them during the war' (84-5). His disillusionment with his

78 See Ondaatje, Michael. *In the Skin of a Lion* (London: Picador, 1988), pp179-80.

contribution to the war effort, once a source of pride and purpose, is revealed by his swift injection of morphine into his arm, 'in the time it took for him to turn around' (85), and in Hana's whispered recognition of his country's betrayal; '[a]nd look what they did to you' (85).

While Hana and Caravaggio are disaffected and traumatised both by the fact of their involvement in the war and the motivation for their involvement, they by no means possess these feelings exclusively. Kip and *The English Patient* also share a distaste for the grand myths that shore up the concept of nation. For Kip, the obligation to go to war stems from his brother's denial of family tradition by refusing to enlist in the army. 'He refused', Kip explains to Hana, 'to agree to any situation where the English had power' (200). Though Kip's brother is indignant about the English occupation of India and the demand that Indian's, as subjects of Britain, should fight for the British cause, Kip just 'hate[s] confrontation' (200). Consequently, Kip replaces his sibling in the enlistment: seemingly just one brown face replacing another, like disposable coloured ciphers.

This embracing of tradition and acquiescence to colonial rule does not mean that Kip is ignorant of the power relationships at work here. Within the orthodoxy of the myth of the greater good, diversity is supposably cohered and focused by the pursuit of the same end. As for Caravaggio, this myth should guarantee Kip participation and a role, premised as it is on the risk of a final shared experience - death - which does not discriminate between class or race, but rather deals in the base equality of mortal blood. The reality for Kip, however, is far different. The narrator tells us that, '[i]n England he was ignored in the various barracks', and his fellow soldiers 'would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him' (196). 'The English!', Kip exclaims in exasperation, 'They expect you to fight for them but they won't talk to you' (188).

Kip realises, like Caravaggio, that the idea of greater good as the driving force in an egalitarian economy of nations is a myth. Yet by virtue of race, the Sikh has a more personal insight into the dynamic and can see its implications. Benedict Anderson proposes that one of the distinguishing features of the nation as an imagined community is that, 'regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'.⁷⁹ Kip perceives the existence of the same inequality and

79 Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1992), p7.

exploitation within the supposed 'horizontal comradeship' of commonwealth. Commonwealth is a customary paternal structure, a hierarchy, softened only by the imaginary existence of England as the motherland. As a hierarchy, commonwealth nurtures racism and marginalises the Other. Kip's harsh treatment is 'a result of being an anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world' (198).

The English Patient, in pointed contrast to Kip, does not come from an 'invisible world', though he has actively sought to avoid any label of national identity. Throughout the novel, one of the key dramatic tensions is Hana, Kip, and especially Caravaggio's constant speculation about who the patient is and from whence he comes. 'All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless' (98). Once, the reader is told, The English Patient lived in a 'landscape of trout streams [and] birdcalls that he could recognise from a halting fragment. A fully named world' (21). Lying in a hospital bed at the Villa burned beyond recognition, however, he is simply 'The English Patient'.

The desire to erase identity is inextricably linked to the potential destruction that nation states can cause. The English Patient recalls the death of his dearest friend, Madox, a man who, with the onset of World War II, felt obliged to return to England from his preferred life in the Libyan desert. Back in the English town of Yeovil, Madox finds himself in a crowded church.

When the sermon began half an hour later, it was jingoistic and without any doubt in its support of the war. The priest intoned blithely about battle, blessing the government and the men about to enter the war. Madox pulled out the desert pistol, bent over and shot himself in the heart. Yes, Madox was a man who died because of nations (242).

Taking his own life was Madox's personal protest against the futility of war, and against the tragically flawed sense of obligation to the nation myth.

Apart from an obvious example of the devastation war can cause, Madox's death is of particular interest given its unusual circumstances. The jingoistic rhetoric of a sermon, the apparent confluence of religion and politics, reifies the state and perpetuates myths of nation. Religion in some form has always guided the actions of man, carrying with it a moral imperative, and a sense of tradition and community. In these

aspects, it displays innocent mythical elements. But religion also incorporates a political agenda that can be exploited. Ondaatje pointedly suggests that the notion of duty to the communal good can gain considerable weight from religious reinforcement. If the nation myth has efficacy only when the nation appears to embrace the sum of things human and divine, then the sanction of the Church constitutes the divine ratification of the nation's very human cause. The greater good, and the duty of the citizen to that greater good, become entrenched and unchallengeable.

All that need be constant for myth to have effect is faith, for myth, by its very nature, cannot be refuted. Strong though the sway of these myths is, they are insufficient to prevent Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip from registering their disenchantment with nations. As a corollary the myths of nation lose their hold. The juxtaposition between these three and Madox and *The English Patient* in the desert, is that the tags of national identity for the latter had for the most part become redundant before the war. *The English Patient* explains: 'we were German, English, Hungarian, African. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation states' (138).

For *The English Patient* the death of Madox is an unnecessary tragedy, as it signals the encroachment of national identity and cause into a desert microcosm where such concepts had become irrelevant. When Madox and *The English Patient* parted for the last time, Madox had said,

[m]ay God make safety your companion. Goodbye. A wave. There is only God in the desert, he wanted to acknowledge that now. Outside of this there was just trade and power, money and war. Financial and military despots shaped the world (250).

In so saying, both Madox and *The English Patient* reiterate Caravaggio's point about the construct of nation serving only the rich. Clark notes that, 'wars may be initiated by old men for their personal or political advantage: [but] they are actually fought by young men and nations'.⁸⁰

That an artifact like 'nation' can be shored up by myth to embody a divine aspect, and then be employed to serve a selfish few 'financial and military despots', is inherently offensive to Ondaatje. It is a theme to which *The English Patient* often returns. Ondaatje is at pains to

⁸⁰ Clark, Stephen. *Op cit*, p111.

highlight a causal connection between the powerful privileged classes, human constructs like nation, and the sense of obligation to these constructs. The text frequently suggests that a transcendent obligation to any artifact, whether nation or the greater good, which supplants a personal intuition or emotion in human relationships, is ultimately damaging. In *The English Patient*'s words, 'we are deformed by nation states' (138).

While I shall elaborate further on this theme, it is important to note that this is only a fragment of the vision of *The English Patient*. While the novel calls down myths that underwrite the nation by its illustration of war as destructive, and critiques the concept of nation per se by presenting it as a lever for the privileged, it also examines the precise impact of war on people thrown into conflict by their adherence to mythical belief. This examination could be grouped loosely under two thematic headings, betrayal and distrust, and it illustrates Ondaatje's privileging of the particular over the general. I have already canvassed some instances of betrayal, but it is important that this theme is enlarged upon to demonstrate how it links the myths of nation and the destruction of personal relationships.

The genesis of the betrayal for most of the characters is the intense pain caused by the death of lovers, friends and family. Hana, for instance, traces her betrayal to two distinct deaths: that of her child and that of her father. Of the first, she tells Caravaggio, 'I was almost going to have a baby a year ago ... [but] I lost the child. I mean, I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war' (82). She later confirms, 'then Patrick died. I was in Pisa when I heard ... After that I stepped so far back no one could get near me' (82-5).

The dual impact of an abortion and the loss of her father throws Hana into a state of emotional bankruptcy, for which caring for *The English Patient* offers the only solace. The connection is made explicit:

[d]id her father struggle into his death or die calm? Did he lie the way *The English Patient* reposes grandly on his cot? Was he nursed by a stranger? She cannot bear to talk of or even acknowledge the death of Patrick (90-2).

The English Patient becomes a band-aid hastily fastened over the memory-wound of her father and child. In his charred form and effaced identity, he represents the child she *could* have cared for and the father she feels she *should* have cared for. And in his tentative grasp on

life, Hana temporarily resolves the dilemma of mass death: '[i]t was important to remember their names. But I kept seeing the child whenever they died' (83).

Kip empathises with Hana's pain.

Hana is quiet. He is always coaxing her from the edge of her fields of sadness. A child lost. A father lost. 'I have lost someone like a father as well' (271).

The father-figure that Kip alludes to is Lord Suffolk, an eccentric and autodidact, who welcomes Kip into his bomb disposal team 'as if he were the prodigal son returned ... to the family' (189). In May 1941, however, this family is shattered by the death of Lord Suffolk and his two closest associates, Miss Morden and Mr Harts, while defusing a bomb in Erith. Acting on his feelings of betrayal and desolation after hearing the news, Kip 'packed the shadow of his teacher into a knapsack ... and reenlisted into the anonymous machine of the army' (195-7), heading for the campaign in Italy.

The English Patient is the third character in the novel for whom the deaths of loved ones can be viewed as betrayal. The pain of his experience is certainly evident in his lament to Caravaggio late in the novel, '[e]verything I have ever loved or valued has been taken away from me' (257). The most notable instance in the discussion thus far is the suicide of Madox. But a further death haunts The English Patient: the death of a lover, Katherine Clifton. While the events surrounding her death appear at first to be innocent, the tale unravels to reveal a complex web of intrigue and duplicity.

The English Patient is convinced that Katherine's death stemmed from his own hubris. Leaving Katherine badly injured after a plane crash with her husband Geoffrey, the English Patient strikes off into the desert to El Taj for assistance. On his arrival, he is rounded up by British troops and is prevented from returning. He recalls the incident with some disgust: '[t]hey hauled me up on the truck ... I was just another possible second-rate spy. Just another international bastard' (251). With retrospect, however, The English Patient realises his error was that he 'didn't give them the right name' (250). Caravaggio pursues the matter further, pressing him: '[w]ake up! What did you say?' (250). Distraught, The English Patient replies, 'I said she was my *wife*. I said *Katherine* ... whereas the only name I should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton's' (250-1).

The English Patient believes that he has escaped from the network of obligations generated by the privileged classes, having abandoned it as a vice of a corrupt world. This is evidenced by his inability to use Clifton's name and his stubborn insistence on calling Katherine his wife. Rather, The English Patient believes that the desert is the 'place they had come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry' (246). He imagines himself, like he imagines Herodotus, as 'one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage' (118-9).

The elements of self-determination, trust and tolerance are transcendent in this description. It is the first of these, self-determination, that effectively denies any privileging of the communal over the personal. When combined, the text suggests, these characteristics enable freedom of movement and an unprejudiced trading of ideas and beliefs. Such flexibility is reflected in The English Patient's own life, for even when comparing himself to Madox, his closest companion, he confesses they were 'utterly unlike each other' (241). It is this sense of the personal, the relationships between individuals overriding a sense of duty to any transcendent construct, whether class or nation, that defines The English Patient's conception of his own multinational group of explorers in the desert.

Ondaatje is at pains to illustrate, however, that not everybody shares The English Patient's distaste or disregard for the construct of nation. The privileged classes especially have an interest in upholding the nation myth, for herein lies the military resources to protect and uphold their position in the community. From the outset of his affair with Katherine, Madox, who himself descended from aristocracy, tactfully tries to educate his friend about the broader world of privilege upon which he encroached with the relationship. The English Patient remembers: 'I carried Herodotus, and Madox ... carried *Anna Karinina*. One day, far too late to avoid the machinery we had set in motion, he tried to explain Clifton's world in terms of Anna Karinina's brother' (237). The passage continues:

[h]alf Moscow and Petersburg were relations or friends of Oblonsky. He was born into the circle of people who were, or who became, the great ones of this earth. A third of the official world, the older men, were his father's friends and had known him from the time he was a baby in petticoats. They could not overlook one of their own (237).

It is precisely Madox's point that,

Geoffrey Clifton was a man embedded in the English machine. He had a family genealogy going back to Canute. The machine would not necessarily have revealed to Clifton, married only eighteen months, his wife's infidelity, but it began to encircle the fault, the disease in the system (237).

Madox tries in vain to illustrate to *The English Patient* that his small social deception would have serious ramifications; that in reality the explorers were not beyond either the discrete convolutions of privileged society or the constructs of nation. In this Madox effectively reiterates Caravaggio's earlier statement to Hana about the rich being locked into their own world, and corroborates *The English Patient*'s ultimate realisation that 'financial and military despots shaped the world'. It is not until the concluding chapters of the novel, however, that Caravaggio explains how this was so. Discovering that *The English Patient* is the German spy Almásy, Caravaggio trades information about the war in the desert and discloses to him the manner in which the explorer and his vision had been betrayed.

Geoffrey Clifton was with British intelligence. As far as the English were concerned, he was keeping an eye on your strange group in the Egyptian-Libyan desert. They knew the desert would some-day be a theatre of war (252).

At one level Almásy is betrayed by the simple fact that Clifton works under deep cover for British intelligence. On another level, Almásy's idealistic conception of the desert and his friends is, much like the mirage he wishes to piece together, shown to be illusory. The desert itself is unimportant as a repository of history or as a unique natural phenomena, to be explored and understood to the benefit of mankind. Neither is it a sanctuary into which to retreat from the world. Instead, the desert and its inhabitants assume significance only as potential instruments for international warfare.

Caravaggio divulges further information to show the intricate links between the ostensibly isolated group in the desert and national interests.

Intelligence thought you had killed Geoffrey Clifton over the woman. [They] knew about your affair with his wife, from the beginning. You had become the enemy not when you sided with Germany but when you began your affair with Katherine Clifton (252-5).

It is because Almásy courted someone privileged, someone whose life was intricately woven into the delicate tapestry of national affairs by way of marriage, that he also courted disaster. The explorer's supposition that 'information of the affair trickled down to [Clifton] somehow' (171), is embarrassingly naive. Too many people close to Katherine and Almásy were aware of the nuptial betrayal. 'There were [even] some people in Intelligence who knew you personally', Caravaggio confirms. It is preordained; then, that even Clifton would come to know of his wife's infidelity eventually. As 'the privileged will not overlook one of their own', the information was sure to have been passed on.

In the light of this assumption, the mystery of an aircraft crashing in the desert no longer seems accidental. His body attuned to the rhythms of morphine, Almásy re-lives the incident.

I was waving the blue tarpaulin. Clifton dropped altitude and roared over me, so low that the acacia shrubs lost their leaves. The plane veered to the left and circled, and sighting me again realigned itself and came straight towards me. Fifty yards away from me it suddenly tilted and crashed. I thought he was alone. He was supposed to be alone. But when I got there to pull him out, she was beside him (256).

Almásy is adamant that Clifton's destruction of his aircraft had 'been planned as a suicide-murder' (171). The fact that Katherine was an unexpected passenger, and that the plane 'suddenly tilted and crashed', corroborates this interpretation by suggesting a more sinister orchestration of events than mere accident.

Clifton's motives aside, it is apparent that an interface exists between betrayal, the privileged, and commitment to a national idea. This is brought home to the reader in Caravaggio's circumstances. Although he has lost a friend in the war, Hana's father Patrick, Caravaggio's sense of betrayal lies primarily in the fact that he himself has been crippled. The ramifications of the injuries, too, have caused significant difficulties for the thief.

Caught climbing from a German officer's bedroom window with an incriminating roll of film, Caravaggio is brutally tortured by having his thumbs hacked from his body. The crushing impact of the torture on his psyche is visible in Caravaggio's inability to stem the flow of memories in his life at the Villa. The simple act of upsetting a table

recalls the incident in his mind: 'they had handcuffed him to the thick legs of an oak table' (58).

Furthermore, reshaping a life faced with physical disability has also been difficult for Caravaggio. Trying to explain gently to Hana his drastic change in self, from confident thief to unbalanced war victim, he uses a small contrast. 'She feels the cloth lift in the area below her shoulder as he holds it with two fingers and tugs it softly towards him. "I touch cotton like this"' (54). In this simple act there is now a metaphor for Caravaggio's life: regardless of how trivial, he must now do everything differently.

Of all the changes in Caravaggio's life, however, nothing has been more ruinous and life-altering than the addiction to morphine that was the side-effect of his injuries. I have already touched on Caravaggio's feelings of obligation to, deception by, and ultimate rejection of, the idea of nation, but it is in his morphine dependency that the extent of the betrayal is revealed. The narrator tells us,

[a]ll his life he has avoided permanent intimacy. Till this war he has been a better lover than husband. He has been a man who slips away, in the way lovers leave chaos, the way thieves leave reduced houses (116).

At the Villa, however, this Caravaggio is conspicuously absent. 'War has unbalanced him and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises' (116). The text suggests, however, that once Caravaggio has overcome his addiction, he would not wish to return to his atomised existence. Through his disillusion and dependency, the thief has found the need for 'permanent intimacy'; the need to stay and not 'slip away'. Caravaggio has been fundamentally altered by his wartime experience, and will not reclaim his former self.

Although he had 'never imagined himself to be a man with a sense of age and wisdom' (58), Caravaggio sees the changes in himself. He has lived 'through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him was a lie' (117). From the myths that guaranteed him a socially legitimised role in the conflict, to the invention of 'double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh [and] qualities of character' (117), everything Caravaggio has experienced about international conflict has proved to be spurious. This overwhelming sense of distrust

seems to be the *raison d'être* for Caravaggio's preoccupation with Almásy's identity:

[h]e needs to know who this Englishman from the desert is ... or perhaps invent a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflages a burned man's rawness (117).

Yet almost as soon as it occurs to Caravaggio, the second option is discarded. Such invention is a lie, he realises, and as such rests uneasily with his new self and his conviction that 'they were shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others' (117). There is 'hardly a world around them', Caravaggio recognises, 'and they are forced back on themselves' (40).

It is precisely this notion of truth in human exchange, of being forced back into a reliance on others, that the text maintains is lost through an unthinking obligation to the nation state. Witness the experience of Almásy, whose faith in his companions is shown to be misplaced by their belief in the nation as a sacred or transcendental concept. In the absence of truth, *The English Patient* suggests, distrust becomes the *modus operandi* of human relations.

This premise is illustrated soon after Caravaggio arrives at the Villa. Although he is a man the child Hana thought of as the Scarlet Pimpernel, bringing her 'cold meals in [his] pockets, pencil cases, [and] sheet music off some Forest Hill piano' (55), their relationship needs to be redefined in the climate of betrayal and distrust generated by the war. As Caravaggio attempts to console the weeping Hana she spits back a vituperative ultimatum; '[d]on't touch me if you're going to try and fuck me' (45). Though a caustic response to a man Hana has called 'uncle' all her childhood, her suspicion is an emotion well understood by Caravaggio. All his life he too has been 'a thief who refused to work with men because he did not trust them' (47).

Kip, likewise, is characterised by a disbelief in others, 'trusting only those who befriended him' (197). One such person is Lord Suffolk, 'the first real gentleman [Kip] had met in England' (186). In telling Kip, 'I trust you Mr Singh, you know that, don't you' (186), Lord Suffolk signals his unprejudiced acceptance of the young Sikh, an acceptance in which Kip revels. The trans-cultural embrace extended by the English peer, however, is not at all typical of Kip's experience.

After defusing a particularly difficult bomb in a field with Hana by his side, Kip reflects.

If he were a hero in a painting, he could claim a just sleep. But as even she had said, he was the brownness of a rock, the brownness of a muddy storm-fed river. And something in him made him step back from even the naive innocence of such a remark. The successful defusing of a bomb ended novels. But he was a professional. And he remained a foreigner, the Sikh. His only human and personal contact was this enemy who had made the bomb (105).

Kip's otherness is reiterated here, and imbued with a sense of interminability. The prejudice Kip encounters, unlike the representations of hardship in the novel, does not locate any satisfactory closure. He is excluded by birth from the renaissance images he has seen in Italy, for instance, 'some secure couple in a field ... with their laziness of sleep' (104). His world is defined by exclusion, and Hana's naive comment about skin colour only serves to identify the physical manifestation of this difference.

Most saliently, the above passage also highlights the burden of the war on Kip's psyche. Not only is he a foreigner, a Sikh, but he is also a professional. Ondaatje draws out the implications of warfare and its psychological impact on the individual through the experience of Kip. By the time Kip reaches the Villa he is unable to indulge his emotional urges or divorce himself from his wartime occupation. 'Why couldn't he sleep?', Kip asks himself, '[w]hy couldn't he turn to the girl, stop thinking that everything was still half lit, hanging fire?' (105).

The boundaries between night and day, safety and danger, have collapsed for Kip: everything is 'half lit, hanging fire'. Put simply, the danger and duplicity he sees in all things means that he cannot trust. The war is everywhere: '[h]ow could he trust even this circle of elastic on the sleeve of the girl's frock that gripped her arm? Or the rattle in her intimate breath as deep as stones within a river' (105). Even the landscape around him has become:

only a temporary thing, there is no permanence to it. As if his mind, when unused, is radar, his eyes locating the choreography of inanimate objects for the quarter of a mile around him, which is the killing radius of small arms (86).

With his radar-like mind, Kip detects only danger in the choreography of objects. His distrust forecloses on the human ability to enjoy the aesthetics and animation of the natural environment.

The implications of this state of mind are shown to be destructive. Kip's overriding sense of duty to the task of bomb defusement requires him to live not like a human being, but like an animal, constantly alert to danger and wary of the unusual. He questions the update kit sent to all bomb disposal units, for example, entitled '[w]hen is explosion reasonably permissible?' It reads:

[i]f a man's life could be capitalized as X, the risk at Y, and the estimated damage from explosion at V, then a logician might contend that if V is less than X over Y, the bomb should be blown up; but if V over Y is greater than X, an attempt should be made to avoid explosion in situ (212).

By asking, '[w]ho wrote such things?', Kip voices his indignation about the value of human life being reduced to the inanimate: mere ink scratches on blotting paper. Yet paradoxically, he is conscious that this is how he has become.

I wasn't even frightened down there. I was just angry - with my mistake, or the possibility that there was a joker. An animal reacting just to protect myself. Only Hardy, he realized, keeps me human now (216).

In the face of his emotional quiescence, Kip's humanity has been the subject of a slow but purposeful erasure by the forces of war. Kip acknowledges that he maintains only a tentative grip on his essential humanity; this being vested in Hardy, his comrade and only trusted friend still alive.

A connection is being made in the text between Kip's cultural marginalisation, his wartime obligation, the perpetration of distrust, and the desire for self-sufficiency. There is a further causative connection being highlighted between self-sufficiency and dehumanisation, a link I shall examine shortly. Initially, however, I shall consider the interaction between the first three themes.

It is easy to see how Kip's marginalisation could drive him to a state of self-sufficiency. Ignored and prejudiced by the vast majority of people he has met since the beginning of the war, Kip has built up barricades of character against the pain caused by the betrayal of his trust. So ingrained are these defence mechanisms, that Kip can accept prejudice and the distrust that it breeds as unexceptional norms of behaviour. Kip, having at first been alienated by his adopted society, becomes self-alienating in order to shield himself from further terrors (both real and imagined).

[Hana] knows this man beside her is one of the charmed, who has grown up an outsider and so can switch allegiances, can replace loss. There are those who are destroyed by unfairness and those who are not (271-2).

Kip's self-sufficiency and independence therefore become self preservation techniques for the marginalised, the Other. To avoid being destroyed by unfairness Kip can only resort to the internalised defences of self-sufficiency.

The war that forms the backdrop to this denouement has only served to exacerbate Kip's drive for self-sufficiency. The narrator tells us:

[t]he self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as much a result of being an anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world (198).

Kip's sense of duty to the life-threatening task of bomb disposal has compelled him to shun emotional contact with others. To let people like Hana close is to allow 'him[self to] feel responsible for her ... as if she had made him owe her something' (104). In Kip's eyes, his life-endangering employment precludes such obligations. 'He has walked up Italy with eyes that tried to see everything except what was temporary and human [and] has learned that the only thing safe is himself' (218).

Thus Hana observes of Kip that 'he has emerged from the fighting with a calm which, even if false, means order for him ... Everything else, apart from danger, is periphery' (126). Coherence for Kip can only be found in the known resources of the self. Yet while the need to be self-sufficient has demanded that Kip delimit the relationships in his life, he occasionally exhibits a loss of control to emotion. Hana, for example,

has taught [Kip] to make a noise, desired it of him, and if he is relaxed at all since the fighting it is only in this, as if finally willing to admit his whereabouts in the darkness, to signal his pleasure with a human sound (126-7).

Kip further admits to himself that 'he wanted Hana's shoulder, wanted to surround the girl with [comfort], to guide her' (114). Yet despite this apparent breach of Kip's affective armour, Hana realises 'he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him. She will stare at

the word ... and carry it to a dictionary. *Beholden. To be under obligation*' (128).

The corollary of this distrust and drive for self-sufficiency, *The English Patient* suggests, is a process of dehumanisation. In Kip's realisation earlier that only Hardy keeps him human, there is an acknowledgment of man's congenital needs as a social animal. The text implies that the reciprocity of human relationships, the sharing of trust and acceptance of obligation, define an essential humanity. Caravaggio discovers late in the novel that there is no comfort in the greater myths of nation or in the roles they offer.

Caravaggio wants to rise and walk away from this villa, the country, the detritus of a war. He is just a thief. What Caravaggio wants is his arms around the sapper and Hana or, better, people of his own age, in a bar where he knows everyone (251).

Both Caravaggio and Kip are emotional amputees - but they are the 'outer' limb which has been severed from the body of society (nation/commonwealth), and were accomplices in their own amputation. What Caravaggio needs is to end his debilitating self-sufficiency and to find the comfort of people; the feelings of love and acceptance that the Romantic poets tell us are so integral to human happiness. And for him there is the only the 'desert [and] its architecture of morphine' (251) to traverse before he finds it.

Caravaggio's decision to alter his view of relationships stands in stark contrast to Almásy, who has lived most of his life drawing only on the resources of the self. It is through Almásy's doomed affair with Katherine that Ondaatje interrogates the trauma of this mythical self-sufficiency. It is important to note that Almásy and Katherine are fundamentally different in their values system and in their age (she being considerably younger) and this creates the tension between them. Almásy ponders their juxtaposition:

[h]er passion for the desert was temporary. She'd come to love its sternness because of him, wanting to understand his comfort in its solitude. She was always happier in rain, in bathrooms steaming with liquid air, in sleepy wetness ... Just as she loved family traditions and courteous ceremony and old memorized poems. She would have hated to have died without a name. For her there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he had erased the path he had emerged from (170).

Almásy has clearly rejected some major constructs of western society: nation, class and tradition, and the obligations that they generate. He feels beholden only to himself, drawing strength from the calcified shell that contains him, protecting him from the responsibility that true love for another human brings. In his relationships, then, he is empowered and dismissive:

'[w]hat do you hate most?', he asks.

'A lie. And you?'

'Ownership', he says. 'When you leave me, forget me' (152).

To own is to be held responsible, and to be responsible is to be beholden: Almásy will accept neither. His very love for the desert stems largely from the fact that it 'could not be claimed or owned - it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred other shifting names' (139). Nameless and ownerless, the desert can offer a comfort to those lost souls wandering in its vast anonymity. 'He, who has never felt alone in the miles of longitude between desert towns. A man in a desert can hold absence in his cupped hands knowing it is something that feeds him more than water' (155).

The text insists, however, that such comfort is fleeting. To deny relationships or their obligations is to live in an emotional desert: one far more terrible and lonely, we are given to believe, than a mere sand blown world could ever be. One of Almásy's deepest regrets is that he left his affection for Madox 'unspoken ... this man [he] loved more than any other man' (240-1). In his association with Katherine, Almásy experiences that same regret. He verbalises his frustration to himself in the midst of their relationship.

What he would say to this woman whose openness is like a wound, whose youth is not mortal yet. He cannot alter what he loves the most in her, her lack of compromise, where the romance of the poems she loves still sits with ease in the real world (157).

The quotation suggests that Almásy's self-sufficiency is born of age and experience, and that only the young and innocent can cohere a romantic idealism with a problematic reality. That openness between people is dangerous, 'like a wound'.

Herein lies the fundamental dynamic in the relationship. Katherine is unequivocal: 'If you make love to me', she states, 'I won't

lie about it. If I make love to you I won't lie about it' (152). Almásy is evasive:

[w]omen want everything of a lover. And too often I would disappear below the surface. And there was ... my old desire for self-sufficiency, my disappearances, her suspicions of me, my disbelief that she loved me (238).

Katherine is damning of Almásy's capricious behaviour. 'You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership', she cries, 'of being owned, of being named. You think this is a virtue. I think you are inhuman' (238).

Yet for Almásy, 'all relationships [fall] into patterns. You fell into propinquity or distance' (151). He believes himself to be 'experienced in the ways of the world he had essentially left years earlier' (151), to have discovered techniques for avoiding the potential betrayal inherent in obligation. The very techniques of anonymity and self-sufficiency that protect Almásy, though, paradoxically cause him the greater pain. They override 'his hunger to burn down all social rules, all courtesy' (155) to have her, and he and Katherine fall into distance. A series of misinterpretations ensue:

[u]ncharacteristically manic, he attacks the history of exploration. She misinterprets his behaviour, assuming this is what he wants, and doubles the size of the wall to protect herself (155).

The lack of communication and trust in their relationship contributes to the misunderstanding and widens the rift between the two. Almásy sees the chaos this distance causes in his life and the implications for Katherine: '[h]e has been disassembled by her. And if she has brought him to this, then what has he brought her to?' (155).

The exhaustive demands of self-sufficiency have only brought pain to Almásy and those who love, or are loved, by him. With the rotting aircraft disintegrating around him, a pungent metaphor for the collapse of the prefabricated structures of nation, he becomes aware that:

[h]e is old. Suddenly. Tired of living without her. He has no one. He is exhausted not from the desert but from solitude. Madox gone. The woman translated into leaves and twigs (175).

Far from calling down western belief systems and offering an alternative world view, Almásy's longing for solitude has ultimately wrought havoc in his life by denying him that which he desires most: Katherine. To be disillusioned with the flawed notions of duty to the nation myth cannot lead a total rejection of obligation. She corroborates this assessment.

You think you are an iconoclast, but you are not. You just move, or replace what you cannot have. If you fail at some thing you retreat into something else. Nothing changes you. How many women did you have? I left you because I knew I could never change you (173).

With Katherine's death foreclosing on their relationship, Almásy apprehends the hollowness of his existence. Caravaggio wonders at the burned man's occasional lapses into the third person when relating the events in the desert. 'Who was talking, back then?' he inquires. Almásy replies, '*Death means you are in the third person*' (247). Everything that Almásy has valued has been stripped from him, and the intermittent use of the third person signals that he views this loss as an analogue for personal death. Caravaggio's innocent words to Almásy, 'nothing will kill you my friend, you are pure carbon' (109), assume an ironic dimension in the light of this knowledge. Almásy's husk of carbon symbolises an effacement of the human element in himself, an effacement born of a drive for self-sufficiency. This is the physical manifestation of an inhumanity that Katherine saw earlier within him.

Almásy's repudiation of his one-time system of values has a special significance for Kip. Throughout the novel Kip has been compared with Almásy,⁸¹ and the similarities between the two do not escape the spy. He mentions to Hana that he and Kip are 'both international bastards - born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere ... though Kip doesn't recognize that yet' (177). A more important link between the two emerges from a discussion that Caravaggio has with Almásy. The latter broaches the subject of Caravaggio's 'absurd' name.

There's a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. *David with the Head of Goliath*. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness in the picture. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The

81 See, for example, pp88-9 and p111.

judging of one's own mortality. I think when I see him at the end of my bed that Kip is my David (116).

Although the indices of youth and age are useful to plot the changes in the Caravaggio of the novel - he has been 'a man who slips away, in the way lovers leave chaos, the way thieves leave reduced houses ... [but] now, with his face and his trunk filled out and this greyness in him, he is a friendlier human being' (116-266) - for the purposes of this argument a more salient comparison can be made between the youthful Kip and the aged Almásy.

What is at issue is the very efficacy of self-sufficiency as an ordering and structuring device for the individual. In retrospect Almásy knows that his self-obsession and inability to be beholden at a personal level has precipitated his unhappiness. He also sees that even in his youthfulness, Kip shares similar tendencies. He, too, has become disillusioned with the prefabricated roles and obligations offered by the myth(s) of nation. The mitigating factor for the Sikh is his relationship with Hana, and it appears that Kip may well overcome his tendency toward self-absorption in his commitment to her. At the celebration dinner for Hana's birthday, in response to Caravaggio's question about where he will go when the war finally ends, Kip answers implicitly with questions of his own.

The sapper asked for stories about Toronto as if it were a place of peculiar wonders ... [but] what he was really interested in were the clues to Hana's nature (268).

Their intimacy has transcended the barriers that underwrite Kip's self-sufficiency - those of race, culture and the war - enabling Hana to sing later in the evening 'with and echoing the heart of the sapper' (269).

Problematically, however, this relationship has flourished within the protective walls of the Villa, and one August day these walls come tumbling down. Kip, listening to his earphones in a field, emits a scream and 'sinks to his knees, as if unbuckled' (282). Pausing only to pick up his rifle he sweeps into the Villa and levels the weapon at Almásy.

I sat at the foot of this bed and listened to you, Uncle. These last months. When I was a kid I did that, the same thing. I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. Was it just ships that gave you such power?

Was it, as my brother said, because you had the printing presses? You and then the Americans converted us (283).

Kip's anger is prompted by the news of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and this irrevocably alters his perceptions of his companions at the Villa. Once the

weeping from shock and horror [is] contained, he see[s] everything, all those around him, in a different light. Night could fall, fog could fall, and the young man's dark brown eyes would still reach the new revealed enemy (284).

Kip and Hana's relationship is destroyed by the knowledge that 'the young soldier is right. They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation' (286). The trust that has flowered at the Villa, where Kip could sit comfortably at the end of a bed and listen to an 'Englishman', or lie at night in the arms of a Canadian girl, is betrayed. Like Madox, Kip has experienced 'someone's war slashing apart his delicate tapestry of companions'. These people he had grown to trust 'turned out now to be the enemy' (241).

That the 'greater good' is truly a myth is now brought home to the reader. Power, whether it resides in ships, history or print, manifests itself through the construct of the nation. The west demanded obligation from the east, and 'Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be *pukkah*' (283). Yet this fusion of difference, this supposed equality, is gunned down in a fiery hail of bullets. The world, Kip realises, is divided between the core and the periphery; the white and the black; the powerful and the powerless. 'He has left the three of them to their own world, he is no longer their sentinel ... [h]is name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here' (286-7).

A further dimension is articulated by Hana. In a letter to Cara she writes, '*[f]rom now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize this, we can rationalize anything*' (93). This can be seen as a synopsis of the mythical deconstruction that has occurred in the novel. At one end of the continuum are the myths of nation, the public concerns, where one is placed under a terrible and bloody obligation to kill (and perhaps) die for a concept that is artificially created as sacred. At the other end is one's essential humanity, the dictates of the body and soul, where the ability to love

and trust can transcend borders; can collapse the racial, cultural and religious boundaries that divide us from our fellow human beings.

Ondaatje offers no prescription for harmony. His has been the task of deconstruction. Deconstruction, that is, of the myths that cloud our vision; myths of the general, the public, the nation. In Ondaatje's view, such myths maintain an uncriticised primacy that masks their destructive impact on the particular, the private, and the local. Yet always this depressing post-colonial vision is coloured by the hope that humanity, like Caravaggio, can one day traverse the 'desert and its architecture of [isolation]' (251), to at last commune with each other.

Alex Miller.

Imaginary Homelands: *The Ancestor Game.*

Our age has lost all substantial categories of family, state and race. It must leave the individual entirely to himself, so that in a stricter sense he becomes his own creator.

Søren Kierkegaard

Seated in the school staffroom during afternoon recess, Stephen Muir registers his awareness of a man and a woman who, 'formed a composition of their own ... distinct and unrelated to the activities of the other staff' (10). Stephen observes that '[h]e was Asian. I preferred at once to refer to him in my mind as oriental. There was a coy and half-concealed refinement about him which insisted on this'. The mystique shrouding the oriental man is pierced by Stephen's self-interested conviction that:

he looked as though he would know how I felt. Like my father, I had no close friends. Once I'd not noticed the absences of intimacies of this kind in my life. Things had begun to change for me, however. Since my earliest childhood recollections I'd believed that if I could only reach deeply enough inside myself, one day I'd come upon extensive and complex landscapes rich with meaning and mystery, waiting for me to explore them. I'd believed the purpose of my adult life would lie in the exploration of these places. My confidence in this internal homeland, however, had eroded over the years. It had been my confidence in its existence, in my own uniqueness, which had at one time provided me with an immunity from being infected with the mannerisms and beliefs of my father. Now it seemed there was nowhere to retreat from him. Without it I saw that it was possible I might eventually grow to be indistinguishable from him (p10).

It is this passage perhaps more than any other in the novel, that weaves the thematic threads of *The Ancestor Game* together. Central to this matrix of themes is the notion of place or homeland. The emphasis here is on the spiritual or mental process of composing 'extensive and complex landscapes rich with meaning'. Consequently, the text also addresses the socio-cultural concerns that shape this process of self-shaping. In the passage above, Stephen identifies his father as the primary influence on his sense of self. This is a recurring theme in the text not as a simple representation of paternal legacy, but in the generic sense of ancestry as a moulding force on the present.

In the same way in which *The Ancestor Game* meditates on the relationship between the individual and her or his forebears, it also

meditates on the larger links between present and past. Similarly, the examination of ancestry *per se* is a specific investigation of one element in a comprehensive set of traditions that shape any one individual or moment in time. Stephen's new Asian friend Lang Tzu Feng, whom he first observed in the staffroom above, lends him a piece of prose entitled *The Winter Visitor*. Written by Lang's great aunt, Victoria Feng, it is this work that inspires Stephen to delve into Lang's personal history. From *The Winter Visitor* itself we learn that:

there are ancient forces which make their way through us as rivers make their way through landscapes, reshaping features we had thought to be permanent, moving what we had thought to be stilled forever, and wearing away resolves in us that are not touched even by our strangest imaginings. We are not the person we think we are, but more (44).

Not only does the quotation reinforce Stephen's earlier thoughts about the past's lingering inheritance, but it also suggests that these ancient forces can never be totally exorcised from the self.

Given this insight, *The Ancestor Game* examines how one recasts these elemental influences to create a personal sense of self. 'Freedom', Miller suggests, 'is identity for the individual [and] the essence of freedom is in dislocation from one's origins' (227). Given Miller's countervailing belief that dislocation from one's geneological influences is in fact impossible, it is left unclear from whence emancipation will come. *The Ancestor Game* provides a clue. In it, Miller posits a fictional re-working of the individual narrative as a means of achieving self-determination.⁸²

This retrospective ordering assumes importance in the novel because it invests an uncompromising tradition with a flexibility that guarantees a fluid transition between past influences and present realities. That is to say, *The Ancestor Game* plots the disintegration of myth from a transcendental presence, authoritative and unforgiving, into a provisional form that is subject to fictional reinscription.

This transition from one form of myth to another is inextricably linked to a further transition: the movement from a customary to a conventionalist society. A customary society, the text suggests, is 'not interested in one-offs. Uniqueness is a nuisance for them'. Rather, it

⁸² This mirrors Erik Erikson's observations about the selective reconstruction of the past becoming, in a psychological sense, the individual's choice of parents and family history. See Erikson, Erik. *Op cit*, p111.

harbours a desire to 'derive universal principles' (21). Miller, echoing Rushdie and Ondaatje, is committed to breaking down such totalising structures. *The Ancestor Game* maintains that such ideas are anachronisms in the world's post-modern communities, where increasing displacement and hybridity demand that the individual be a prime mover in the constitution of homeland and identity. Miller is thus concerned with illustrating the repressive characteristics of customary society, particularly its erasure of difference and its lack of flexibility in the face of internal and external pressures for change.

I briefly touched upon some of the defining features of a customary society in my introduction but for present purposes it is necessary to elaborate a little on these. A customary national community is structured in terms of the logic of kinship. The nation embraces all those who share a community of descent. Saliently, however, their shared status as children is differentiated in gender terms.⁸³

Male patriarchs are accorded recognition as heads of households by the state, and it is assumed that they will appropriately express the culture of patriarchal protection within these households (*LID*, 214).

The male's role is to provide for the females under his care in this schema, and they are virtually rendered to him as possessions. Thus Feng muses about his responsibilities to his daughters:

His numerous daughters Feng did not consider as having required from him a real fatherhood, but a kind of careful guardianship, which he was certain he had fulfilled (207).

While the male has a duty to provide, the female has a duty to procreate, to continue the family name. Her role is to bring honour to her husband and her husband's family.

Furthermore, this nuclear core signals a community based on exclusiveness. Lien, Lang's Chinese mother, reflects this in her thoughts about the concept of 'extraterritoriality'. The inhabitants of the International Settlement, she decides:

might not actually *be* gods but they could behave *as though* they were gods, immune from the laws and responsibilities and the constraints of civilised custom; privileged colonists of a terra nullius in which they might deem the

83 Anna Yeatman makes this point in "A Leap Into the Dark". *Op cit*, p210.

natural inhabitants and *their* customs not to be fitting for themselves, irrelevancies which imposed no duties upon them (94).

Lien acknowledges the imagined primacy of her community by suggesting that a choice not to adhere to its customs is 'uncivilised'. A we/they equation exists in Lien's thoughts, and she resents that the inhabitants of the International Settlement could 'behave as though they were gods', possessing an almost supernatural immunity against indigenous convention and ideas of self-responsibility.

It is precisely this custom and responsibility that is the basis of this society. It is a 'natural' community, grounded in what are taken to be the 'organic, customary ties of communities built on common descent and customarily shared ways of life' (*LID*, 213). It is the 'naturalness' of the community's existence, however, that indicates the underlying monolithic myth. Although custom and tradition can maintain the appearance of enduring constancy and become uncritically accepted, the point need not be laboured that both are dynamic and ideologically informed.⁸⁴ August Spiess puts it this way.

I must insist that no interpretation of history can fail to reflect the mind, as well of the state of knowledge, of the person who proposes it, whether that *historian* is sick or bitter and bewildered by the way life has dealt with him, or whether he is filled with hope for the future and emboldened in his judgements by the validations of earlier successes. The true facts of history, then, what are these? (266)

There is, in short, no absolute historical referent for this organic community that can act as a transcendental signifier.

Yet the Chinese community in *The Ancestor Game* rests on just such a notion of reference to the uncontested authority of an originary source: a myth of ancestry. Ancest(o)ry functions as a mythical master narrative through which all human action is ordered and interpreted. It casts back into a shared history and constructs a human archaeology of precedent. With respect to his offspring, for example, the banker Feng can bestow his blessing on his daughters - despite the fact that they took non-Chinese husbands - because daughters traditionally reflect on their husband's family. The limit of his liberalism is reached, however, with the prospect of a son and heir.

⁸⁴ See Hobsbawm, Eric, and Ranger, Terence eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p13-16.

He could not think of the boy as being other than Chinese, as other than that of direct Chinese descent. His three wives had all been from old Chinese families. They had all been Han. This had surprised no one. No one had ever thought of taking C. H. Feng to task for being inconsistent when it came to choosing a mother for his heir. Everyone had understood perfectly (30).

It was of critical importance to Feng that his choice of wife secure an unsullied pedigree for his son. For only ancestry can vouchsafe for the continued honour of the family name and the worth of the individual.

The myth of ancestry can be seen then to soothe anxiety and shore up traditions through a prescriptive approach to role, identity and place. The narrator tells us that Huang, Lien's father and Lang's grandfather, is entrusted with a 'churinga', a 'sacred book of the ancestors' (201). This is:

his connection with the spiritual life of his tribe, his consecrated text, in which he had his place and without which he would be displaced and cast into an alien landscape whose features he would not be able to name, the book without which Huang would be a stranger on this earth (201).

The individual realises his or her place in society only with reference to a complex web of tribal relations. As in the myth of Adam and Eve in the sacred garden of Eden, Huang's 'place' is only inside his consecrated text. If expelled from this matrix he suffers their fate. He is cast adrift, a lost soul wandering in an alien world. There is a spiritual element to the myth of ancestry that demands an unwavering belief in one's ancestors as a real and transcendental force: 'those dead who will not die but insist on asserting an influence over the living'(194).

Through this enduring presence ancestry provides a sense of place and human dignity for the individual. This is illustrated by the toffee apple vendor who sits across the street from Huang's Hangzhou residence.

Whether business promised to be good or bad he came each day and he waited. It was his place. Sooner or later, if not today, then tomorrow, someone would stop and purchase a toffee apple from him. Today he sold three. His expression did not change. It was all the same to him (179).

The toffee apple vendor is unperturbed about the fluctuating sales of his product because he is guaranteed an identity and role in the community that is, like his expression, constant and unchanging. Like the literary painter Huang Yu-Hua, whose scholarly mantle has been in the family for generations, the toffee apple vendor too is part of a working

tradition. His is not the task of aggressively marketing his wares, of challenging the nature of his vocation, or to speculate on the profitability of any one day's trade. His single responsibility is to occupy the 'place' provided by community and ancestry.

In a myth of ancestry, one is judged not on individual merit but on the basis of one's place in a tribe or community. Witness Lien's assessment of August Spiess.

It was not possible to offer [Spiess] an insult. She had found him to be without a care for his own dignity. This she understood to be undoubtedly a consequence of his having been removed from the oversight of his family and the bearers of his ancestral worth (94-5).

Dignity is not an inherent faculty for Lien: instead it is conferred by ancestry and family. By extension, her conviction that 'at home in Hamburg or London or some other place, these extraterritorials would have had to behave once again as human beings' (94), suggests that without the aura of ancestral worth the individual even forfeits an essential humanity.

To unshoulder the cloak of ancestry and insist on an autonomous determination of self and homeland is to sacrifice one's prefabricated role, identity, dignity, and inevitably one's humanity. The inhabitants of the International Settlement, by Lien's standards:

had suffered a *kind* of decease, a departure from life and its supporting structures sufficient to prevent them from returning home to their loved ones, but not sufficient to have delivered them into the tomb (94).

Within this traditional Chinese community, only the tribal or communal matrix can provide life's supporting structures. Thus the exodus from this matrix is life-sapping. Lien is unable to comprehend how Spiess could have 'travelled to the far side of the world and yet managed to stay at home' (93). There is no sustenance for the self-actualising individual in her monolithic world view: the human staples of place and identity are nourished by the network of family and ancestry.

Herein lies a flaw in the monolithic nature of the myth itself. It is a socio-cultural phenomenon that constitutes a 'flaw' only in as much as it offends a Western sensibility. In persisting in labelling it a fault, I open myself to a charge of orientalism, of 'interpreting' the East from a smug and omniscient viewpoint as 'stamped with an otherness, passive

and non-participating'.⁸⁵ Within *The Ancestor Game*, however, the monolithic nature of ancestral myth generates so much emotional repression and dissatisfaction through the exclusion of the self, that it can justifiably be viewed as defective.

The most obvious examples of this inadequacy are found in the plight of Huang and Lien. The myth system is monolithic in nature, and thus self-promulgating until different variables are added. Within a customary society, these variables manifest themselves as breaches of tradition. In *The Ancestor Game* they are predicated on the individual making self-oriented instead of communally oriented decisions. For Huang, the variable is an unforeseen and potent love for his daughter. For Lien, the variables are both the discovery of skills in herself, and a life she cannot hope to lead.

Their tale takes place in China shortly after the turn of this century. The reader is transported through Stephen's writing to Hangzhou, a city in close proximity to Shanghai, to the home of Huang Yu-Hua. This man 'had married but once and knew what it was, therefore, to be judged an eccentric by his peers'. Moreover, he had married her:

to satisfy his relatives in the south, who had insisted he repay his debt to the family for his education by bringing a son into the world. His wife had not survived the birth. The debt had remained unpaid (52).

These breaches of custom, however, merely serve to foreshadow far greater transgressions. For until Lien's birth, the mother of Lang-Tzu, Huang 'had thought of the coming child as no concern of his own' (52). Afterwards, responding to an appeal in the baby's cry he felt was directed at him, 'he made no resistance to a desire to care for the baby', merely prompting resentment from the nurse at 'this unheard-of interference' (53).

The arrival of the little girl, 'like a comet entering the known firmament', woke Huang 'from a deep slumber into which he was unaware that he had fallen' (51). Huang apprehends the child with such bewildered awe that he feels confident to commit the greatest violation of ancestral obligation in his life. Renouncing his professional pursuit of 'a kind of static perfection, a mirror of the work of Hsia Kuei, a Sung master of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries' (52),

⁸⁵ Said, Edward. "Crisis", in Lodge, David ed. *Op cit*, pp 209-305.

Huang, by placing his mouth close to her ear and whispering, '[m]y search is over. I shall look no further' (53-4), breaks 'the most powerful taboo by which his life had been ruled' (53). Substituted in its place is the baby Lien.

His anxieties about how 'how such an outstanding debt [to his ancestors] might be accounted for in the final balance of his life' (52), or his sadness that his friends and fellow scholars had 'ceased to talk about him the present tense', are salved by sniffing the scalp of his child.

The fragrance was of another world and kindled in his imagination images of sunlit gardens and bright musical harmonies that sang to him of an infinite, untroubled wellbeing (54).

Huang has an uncompromising love for his daughter, a love which he knows is excluded from ancestral tradition. His fatherly feelings for Lien are therefore juxtaposed with Feng's feelings of guardianship toward his daughters. To hold Lien in his embrace requires that Huang be a self-determining individual and that he forego the embrace of the myth of ancestry.

Having forsaken the ancestral conventions which previously ordered his life, Huang is forced to decide upon a new metaphor to live by. His choice cossets the young Lien in a benign shroud of secrecy. Within the comfort of this veil a further significant breach of tradition occurs. Lien is raised by Huang as if she were a boy: their meals are taken together, and he does not require her feet to be bound, 'directing her in every way as if she were destined to bring honour to his own family, instead of to the family of the man she would eventually marry' (56-7). The most important aspect of this gender-denial is Lien's introduction to her father's art of literary painting. Her progress is so exceptional that by the 'time she was twelve he might have passed her work off as the very strongest of his own. It was a kind of heavenly anguish to watch her' (54-5).

Yet it is through this very medium that Lien's 'demon emerged at last'. Pausing before a work that was undoubtedly her masterpiece, Lien 'scores the loaded brush through the length of the painting' (55). A horrified Huang questions, '[w]hy my daughter? Why have you destroyed your finest work?' Lien laughs at his question and screams her rebuke. 'Because the donkey needs a tail! Again and again she

scream[ed] her nonsensical message at him' (56). Although the outburst is a troublesome mystery to Huang, and the estrangement from his daughter that ensues an almost unbearable pain, it is not inexplicable.

Lien has come to the realisation at the transitional age of thirteen that her upbringing is far from conventional. She is willing to admit to herself that which Huang cannot: that the lifestyle which Lien has been encouraged to enjoy is actually unavailable to her as a woman. In a customary society her role is only to bring honour to her husband. She is the metaphorical donkey that needs a tail, or phallus, in order to take control the life she has begun to lead. This is acknowledged in her inscription on the painting she later gives to Huang.

As a coda above her seal, she added - henceforth an ironic maxim for her in which the unhappy outcome of her project was to be endlessly recapitulated - *Any girl can learn to draw* (58).

The irony lies in the knowledge that any girl *can* draw, but within the orthodoxy of traditional Chinese culture, no girl *ought* to learn do so.

Lien's childhood is infiltrated by a deep and enduring feeling of dissatisfaction; a dissatisfaction that stems from her inability to be self-determining within the myth of ancestry. Under the weight of Chinese tradition her artistic talent would never have surfaced, effaced by the virtue of service to her husband and his family. Despite her determination to recapture the gender she knows has been despoiled, 'establishing her authority with the servants, and soon becom[ing] the undisputed mistress of Huang's household' (59), Lien has eaten the forbidden fruit of a male role and its taste is not easily given up.

This tension creates a dichotomy in Lien that is to become Huang's nemesis for a breach of tradition. Henceforth she will be straddling two worlds: one where the old ways still legislate for her existence, where she has a place and feels secure; and one where she is intrigued by the unknown, and its potential for liberation and freedom. Yu, the personal servant and confidant to Huang, perceives the internal dichotomy with a sense of foreboding.

It seemed to him that the demon of such a gift as hers must be of the spirit and therefore immortal, and if one entrance to expression is stopped up against it, then such a demon will busy itself burrowing to make another (58).

The demon finally emerges after Lien's first encounter with C. H. Feng, a banker from Shanghai who has westernised both his name and values system. 'Feng had long meditated upon an aversion to the traditional cultures of China and was contemptuous of those who wished to preserve them and the memory of them' (29). In this he is symbolic of the change that grips China, and when Lien's boat collides with his head-on under Quiantangjiang bridge, 'an omen they ... chose to regard with contempt' (78), it represents the impact of the old world and the new. The new world is far from picturesque. '[Feng] was a giant, an ogre, a monstrous spirit [with teeth that] were huge and misshapen' (78-9), 'yet she returned his gaze without recoiling ... for she felt an energy and coldness that delighted her' (79).

Seeing through her boy's disguise, and realising 'they were two aroused beings, so unlike each other or anyone else that they must share a peculiar kind of kinship' (80), Feng barks out his challenge to Lien:

[y]ou're not going to pretend to be old-fashioned, are you, after dressing up like that? I'm from Shanghai. There's no need to be old-fashioned with me. It's much more interesting than a place like this, I can tell you. Hangzhou's a dump. It's stuck in the past. You ought to know. There are plenty of people in Shanghai who'd appreciate that a girl needs to dress as a boy to do anything. Plenty of them (81).

His presence engenders powerful feelings in Lien.

It was the same feeling she had experienced while she was painting her masterpiece. An exultation, a fierceness, elevated her above the impermeability of present reality, or drove her beneath it. There was no difference (79).

Feng appeals to the side of Lien that views her present reality at Hangzhou as impermeable, a homeland she can never quite penetrate and possess. She is unable to entirely dismiss the intrigue of Shanghai, where a woman does not need 'to dress as a boy to do anything'; where regardless of gender Lien can be self-directing.

Lien's primary concern when Feng visits Huang to ask for her hand in marriage is not a fear of the banker, but that:

this event would slip away in a day or two and become the past. Her fear was that she would fail to snatch it from a kind of splendour, a kind of perilous splendour that she knew she must have from life by some means (81).

Ultimately this opportunity for a 'perilous splendour' is afforded her. Lien marries Feng and moves to Shanghai, only to find that 'it was not the place she had imagined it to be' (33). Her predicament is that, having been raised as a boy, she has experienced precisely the liberation and freedom unavailable to her as a Chinese woman. Lien discovers that among the Chinese in Shanghai the values and traditions of the customary community still have considerable force, and far from being a liberated world, Shanghai is equally stifling as her homeland in Hangzhou.

She resents that in her role as wife and mother, 'without power or property of her own [and] dependent on the goodwill of her husband' (25) - in whom is invested an 'arbitrary and tyrannical power by tradition' (32) - her 'body is no longer her own', and 'enjoyment [is] denied to her' (85). Lien is so heavily taxed by the energy she expends on repressing her self-determining desires, that 'her mind seemed not to belong to her anymore, surpris[ing] her with the hysteria of its responses' (85).

Furthermore, at the confluence of East and West that is Shanghai, Lien is exposed to perplexities that she could never conceive of at Hangzhou. These are generated in the most part by the explosive impact of the Western world on China. Although the narrative spans a period of some hundred and twenty years, it focuses primarily on the unsettled ten years of China's history from 1927-1937. Industrialisation and Western capitalism are contesting traditional ways of life during this time, and this is also the period in which the Japanese realise their dream, if only briefly, of colonising China. These combined assaults on tradition are soon to be followed by the establishment of a post World War II communist regime, the decisive blow to an already crumbling mythical edifice.

The classic formulation of Lien's concerns about change lies in the metaphysical crisis she perceives in the notion of extraterritoriality. For Lien, those who resided in the International Settlement, 'might have been classified for her as beings not from a present reality but from another, less certain, location along the perceptual continuum' (93). Such a condition as extraterritoriality is not possible, 'at least not for human beings', and she thus perceives her German doctor, August Spiess, as 'not quite real' (93).

It was apparent to her that [Spiess] and his fellow foreigners had not emerged intact from their acquisition of extraterritorialness, but had forfeited a precious aspect of their humanity in the process. She saw they had become inhabitants of a No-land, where gods, ghosts and ancestors, as well as numerous other unregistered categories of demons and demi-humans, roamed about in a hazy state of speculative indeterminacy, neither entirely alive or dead (93).

Lien now realises that 'she view[s] theirs as a state that no Chinese could possibly rejoice in' (94), but is still distracted by the energies of contradiction. She attempts to explain her situation to Yu:

[t]here are two of me ... as if I am myself and my sister ... *She* is sophisticated and westernised. All the things I loathe. *I* am loyal and determined to defend the verities of my childhood. There is no question of not loving my father and you and this house and our way of life. It isn't that. It isn't that simple. It is just that it all irritates me beyond belief (85).

Lien cannot reconcile the warring factions within herself. When she becomes pregnant, she feels forced to choose one world only for her baby. Her legacy to her child must be more than the indeterminacy of mixed values, Lien feels, and certainly more than the 'No-land' outside of traditional structures. The black and white clarity of monolithic myth, and especially the myth of ancestral tradition, speaks to Lien's onerous uncertainties about the rapidly approaching western world.

The ability of myth to assuage her anxiety strengthens Lien's resolve to retreat into the security of the mythical realm, both for her sake and for that of her child. Lien knows she is privileging a nostalgic romanticism over the abandoned world of Feng, and she is also aware of the contrived nature of her actions. On arrival in Hangzhou, for instance, Lien is suddenly plagued by the doubt that her project is 'hopeless. The vision of a madwoman' (73). She taunts herself with thoughts of Feng's scorn.

How amused Feng would have been to have witnessed this abbreviation of her domain. How he would have smiled to see the poverty of her resources; he whose spaces were so vast and whose resources were princely. [S]he felt herself to be provincial and vulnerable. She imagined his voice, low and ironic and dry: So this is your enchanted courtyard that I must fear? (73).

These troubled imaginings, however, eventually serve to augment her original compulsion to put everything in order around her: 'to establish for herself a kind of orthodoxy of her own. A rampart against irregularities. To give herself a place' (85). Lien is sure that monolithic myths and the customary societies they uphold are an

architecture of certainty in which the bewildered subject can seek refuge from contingency.

Huang, who like Lien felt confident in his rejection of myth, later echoes her sentiments. In his final years the enormous power of myth reasserts itself, and Huang fears that his actions were folly.

His subterfuge, his making a son of his daughter, had evidently angered [the gods] so deeply that they determined to permit him no reconciliation with his ancestors. Despite his visits to the shrine, he was not to be forgiven. It was finished. It was the end of the family. He feared death now more than ever, for he believed it certain he would be transformed into a disfigured ghost for all eternity (210).

This quotation brings home to the reader that myth incorporates a retributive component for non-adherence. Echoing the plight of Gibreel Farishta in *The Satanic Verses*, this punishment is psychological. Huang has an absolute and fearful belief that his decisions in life will preclude peace in the afterlife, and this knowledge prompts him to resile from his earlier defiance. Lien, troubled by the rejection of their relationship which is implicit in her father's regret, can only plaintively enquire of him: '[d]o you regret everything then, father? Is there nothing you would not wish to change if you could return to the past' (174-5). Huang's dogged refusal to answer is evidence of his desire for forgiveness from his ancestors; put another way, a desire not to be excluded further from the security of myth.

The desire of Huang and Lien for the absolute sharpens the contrast between their experience and the frustrating ordeal of Lien's son Lang Tzu. In the comparison between the three generations, Miller is at pains to point out that the traditional structures and beliefs of monolithic myth are becoming increasingly ill-equipped to support the community in a dynamic post-modern world. The patriarch Huang, as the first example, is so firmly entrenched in the mythical tradition that he is even willing to deny his precious Lien to appease his ancestors. Lien, the next generation after Huang, re-embraces the myth of ancestry, but with considerable reservation. For Lang, the option of recourse to ancestry is unavailable.

In their breaches of tradition, Huang and Lien have been unwitting accomplices in the exclusion of Lang from the myth that underwrites their community. The series of transgressions that

culminate in Lien's marriage to Feng have the effect of introducing a variable into the myth-system: a world beyond China.

Like the other two authors examined in this dissertation, Miller stresses that an aggressive politics of exclusion acts as both a shield and buttress to the monolithic myth structure. For Miller, too, this politics of exclusion holds no lasting answers: indeed, as the development of Lang's character epitomises, it is so inherently deficient as to reveal itself as worthless. The novel's dramatic economy is realised under a broad thematic heading: that myth erects barriers to self-determination. He first indicts legitimacy of descent as a flawed standard of inclusion or exclusion for myth. Secondly, he reiterates the privileging of gender (although in this instance from a male perspective) as an internalised challenge to myth. Thirdly, he suggests that monolithic varieties of myth are unable to cater for the specific needs of the individual in the context of a post-modern environment.

To elaborate on Miller's thematic agenda requires a consideration of the relationship of Lang and Spiess. Together these two represent externalised pressure for change in the myth-system. Similarly, their relationship functions as a touchstone for trans-cultural comparison. That is to say, the text encourages comparisons between the German's experience and preoccupations and those of Lang. From this comparison indices of a more general human condition can be derived. These indices, *The Ancestor Game* insists, are the need of all individuals for belonging and community and the troublesome relationship of the need for a homeland with the experiences of exclusion and exile. The tension generated by these polarities is linked with the transition from a monolithic to a provisional, self-determined form of myth. It is on this relationship that I now wish to focus.

In the unusual circumstances of Lang's birth, the connection between the newborn and the doctor who delivered him is made explicit. For Spiess, Lang's delivery in the breech position:

was a duplication of [his] own troubled descent into Hamburg fifty years earlier. It was as if an eternal clock had struck the hour for me. As if at the passage of half a century, at the opposing point on the globe from Hamburg, I had at last arrived at the true time and place of entry into life (114).

With the link between Spiess and Lang established at the moment of birth, the doctor's speculations about the nature of the breech position assume a greater significance.

The infant born in the breech position ... struggles blindly against its birth, is thrust downwards unwillingly through the dilating cervix by the crushing pressures of the muscles of the pelvic floor into a cavity which has opened mysteriously beneath its feet. Surely in the primal memory of the child who survives this awesome journey there lodges the perception that at the very beginning of its life it set out in the wrong direction? Must not every such child carry with it throughout life an unshakeable conviction that it has never arrived in the place it was destined to go? (112).

The dramatic journey of birth is abstracted by Spiess into a metaphor for life. It is likened to a displacement, where he has set out in the wrong direction and never arrived in the place he was destined to go.

In Spiess' life, this intuition has manifested itself as an irrational urge to journey in exile, 'driven from one end of the world to the other in search of something [he has] been unable to describe even to [him]self' (113). Through the metaphor of misdirected birth Spiess predicts an identical destiny for Lang also.

I bestowed upon the infant the name Lang Tzu; two characters which in Mandarin signify the son who goes away. I wished him well on the journey I knew he must one day embark upon in his restless search for a homeland (116).

Certainly Lang's contemplation of his 'Western dimorphism' signals that his thoughts do not, and cannot, reside exclusively in China.

A part of him was displaced. He had become detached from the beginning. There was this vast tract of land he must always consider, and there were the oceans and the islands, there was the World of experience that lay between China and the shores of that mythical country from which his father claimed his doubtful descent: Australia (177).

Lang has been spatially 'displaced' through his ancestry, and is thus 'detached' from 'the continuous shining strand of existence' (177) on which the myth of ancestry is predicated.

This is the fundamental difference between the Chinese and European experience of exile. For the former, the inherent exclusion of ancestral mythology stands as a seemingly insurmountable barrier to the realisation of a Chinese homeland. I have commented earlier on Lang's 'dimorphism', the contradictions inherent in straddling two worlds - symbolised in his split existence between the International Settlement and Hangzhou - and on the anxiety this causes him. Simply put, between the polarities of mother and father, Lang has been unable to constitute any sense of homeland. He longs for 'an assurance.

Something permanent. Something which would not be swept away by his father's contempt for Chinese values when he returned once again with his mother to Shanghai' (167).

Initially Lang is sure that he has discovered this permanence of homeland in Hangzhou. August Spiess suggests that the winter-flowering plum tree that grows in Huang's garden is symbolic of Lang's dimorphism, sending forth its 'perfumed blossoms in the midst of winter and so embod[ying] a double image of life and death' (167). Given that the German is 'the only person who seemed able to see both sides of his situation' (166), Lang believes that the presence of this tree in the world of his mother is a sign of his acceptance there: 'I am kin to the plum tree', Lang whispers to himself. 'She is my sister. I, too, shall bring forth my splendour in the midst of winter's grey' (167).

Problematically, however, Hangzhou can never be a homeland for Lang because he is excluded by ancestry. Although Huang at first accepts the boy, tutoring Lang in the art that the young boy desperately wishes to be his vocation, this soon collapses into rejection. When Huang begins to be troubled by his own betrayal of his ancestors, Yu suddenly finds himself forced to report to Lien that her 'father does not wish to see the boy' (181). Huang further confides to Yu that:

Feng's son (He did not say, My daughter's son) is a demon. You have only to look into the boy's right eye to see his father's thoughts there, mocking us and our Chinese way of life and waiting to see us all destroyed (181).

The words in parentheses encapsulate the change in Huang. As with his own child Lien, Huang has deceived himself about whose family Lang will finally bring honour to, given the prevailing mythical framework. Now wishing to re-embrace myth in his old age, Huang must confront his own fictionalisation: Lang is not the son of Huang, but the son of Feng. As such, Lang can never follow in the literary painter's footsteps.

Yet Huang is by no means alone in his self-deceit. Lien, too, has participated in the fiction.

While she knew it to be an impossibility, she nevertheless behaved as if her son were one day to assume the scholarly mantle of her father, as if Lang really could become a literary painter and carry on the traditions of her family - a family to which, of course, *traditionally* he could never belong. She offered her willing collusion in perpetrating a situation she knew to be entirely fanciful (169).

Lang can never capture a sense of belonging in Hangzhou because he is bound to his father's name. This constitutes an internal and external barrier erected by a monolithic ancestral myth. It privileges the male line and denies Lang the satisfaction of self-determination - to be an artist like his grandfather - prejudicing him by invoking an ancestral relationship that is entirely beyond his personal sphere of influence.

In his sudden and painful awareness of this exclusion, Lang decides to 'destroy the stronghold of the ancestors' (194) through the act of biblioclasm. Taking Huang's churinga, he systematically burns each page and hurls the ancestral mirror into the river. The deed is Lang's final repudiation of his life at Hangzhou, and the beginning of his journey, 'his travelling, his campaign, his going from one place to another, and he knew it would only be halted again by death' (192).

Only halted by death because, in renouncing the world of his mother, Lang does not feel bound to live in the world of his father either. He now appreciates that his place is not to be found in China. After all, the city of Shanghai is the 'dark clamorous world of heavy industry and war [where] his father was a kind of prince' (262). Neither Shanghai or his father's presence are welcome in the life of the would-be artist Lang: for 'until the ancestors had revealed themselves to be the true enemy, his father had been the 'enemy'. The enemy had always been located in Shanghai' (257).

Lang's fear of his father, his perception of the 'Third Phoenix' as a 'kind of legendary being possessed of an absolute authority to dispose of and direct his life' (262), echoes the sentiments of not only Stephen, but also of August Spiess. Herein lies the suggestion of a need in certain people to assert their uniqueness, a need which transcends national and cultural barriers. For these people, there is an innate imperative to establish a place beyond the powerful dictates of ancestry. Spiess, for instance, maintains that 'though born in Hamburg and loved by the dearest of parents, even as a small child I knew I did not belong there' (113). The underlying reasons for this feeling are disclosed in an imaginary conversation with Lang that is penned into the doctor's journal. Here he announces that he secretly cherished an ambition to become a playwright. Only secretly, however, because he realised his father 'would have disapproved of the ambition'. As a corollary, Spiess is aware that:

if it was to be congenial to me as a successful playwright, then the Hamburg of my imaginary future could have no place in it for my father. I had to tamper with reality, therefore, in order to contemplate my solemn and romantic pleasure destiny with pleasure (270).

The Hamburg of Spiess' 'imaginary future', designed to eschew the force of an immediate and overbearing ancestor, mirrors Stephen's imaginary homeland. Both are self-created fictions, 'extensive and complex', and offer an 'immunity from being infected' (10) by the authority of the father.

This theme of fictionalising: whether in the comprehensive sense of a purely imaginary creation, or in the limited sense of a retrospective ordering of actual events, is posited as an integral part of the self-determined construction of homeland in *The Ancestor Game*. It is reiterated often, and by a variety of characters. Victoria, for example, supplants travelling with fictionalising: 'travelling does not interest me', she tells Spiess, and indeed, 'how should I imagine China if I were to visit it?' (289). She further explains, 'I have spent my years imagining China from this garden in Kew ... [and] it's not China but the imagining that interests me' (289). In these daydreams, Victoria can dull the sharpness of the grief caused by her father's absence, joining him 'in a land of pure imaginings ... [a] land which blessed our presence' (254). In another instance, Spiess encourages Lang to:

long for something you can't name, and call it Australia. See a golden city on a plain, shining in the distance, and be certain the greatest prize existence can bestow on you is to belong somewhere among your own kind. Let it be fairyland, an other world. A land imagined and dreamed, not an actual place (259).

What is common to all these instances of fictionalising is the need for a reassertion of self in the constitution of the homeland. Far from allowing monolithic myths to legislate for behaviour and identity, thus effecting a colonisation of the individual, the creation of an imaginary homeland is a recapturing of the ideal of self-determination. If 'the essence of freedom is in dislocation from one's origins', then 'freedom is identity for the individual' (227). The imagination is a personal and unique space where the individual is free to create him or herself. Like art, imagination is:

our dispute with present reality. It shoots out from between the named and the known like a startling and mysterious flame, confounding the familiar. Art utters

a word and the thing so commanded to exist struggles into being. But we cannot own the thing art has brought into being, nor say to what nation it belongs. Art belongs to no nation. Art is the displaced (260).

Constructing a reality, a homeland and a self, for those who conceive of themselves as displaced from their origins, is tantamount to an artistic endeavour. It is commanded to exist, struggles into being, and confounds the familiar with its fantasy. Moreover, it cannot be owned in a literal sense. Fictionalising is a means of capturing a sense of homeland 'in the regions of uncertainty where definitions have yet to be located' (194).

These 'regions of uncertainty' are not to be located amongst communities that have 'been wrestled into being through the fierce valour of warriors set one against the other for generations' (284). The self-determined individual requires the soil of a tolerant community in which to germinate; whereas a customary community is in this respect, Miller suggests, built on barren ground. This is evidenced in one of the extracts from the journals of August Spiess, translated from the German by his daughter Gertrude, which occupy two significant chapters in *The Ancestor Game*. The first of these chapters describes Spiess' excursion into the Chinese interior to the city of Hangzhou, and how he is attacked there because he is a foreigner. This is a community that has been wrestled into being and moulded by a myth of ancestry. Yet Spiess, in his quest for place and identity, mistakenly believes he has found a homeland in Hangzhou.

Spiess's error is that he perceives the trip to Hangzhou to be the fulfilment of one of his most secret and cherished dreams. This dream centres on a particular conception of himself. He has long believed the artist Claude Lorrain to have 'a peculiar detachment from any real place', and in this 'sensed in Claude a spirit close to his own ideal'. 'A painter, indeed, of landscapes of the mind, [painting] pictures of no real place' (271). And once again, this dislocation is linked to the theme of fictionalisation as a means of effecting self-determination.

As one stands before a painting by Claude, the hero in the picture is not Juno or Proserpina, but is oneself. The temple in the middle distance is a shrine dedicated not to a god of the Classical pantheon, a god of one's remote ancestors, but to the worship of oneself, to the worship of the god within oneself, the god by means of whose powers one imagines oneself into being (271).

In his desire to 'accept the invitation to become the heroic figure in [his] own Claudian landscape' (271) and become self-actualising, Spiess allows his dream of securing a homeland to cloud his vision.

Revelling in the knowledge that 'no Westerner had ever been admitted to the house of [Lien's] father, Huang Yu-hua' (92), Spiess pictures himself as the hero in his Claudian landscape:

exalted to the status of a king or a god of the theatre, a mysterious and powerful being who conjures with the secret desires of his devotees at the appointed hour each day. Here, in The City of Heaven there is no inner voice insisting that I must go in search of the real world. And should I doubt it even for a moment I need only raise an eyebrow or crook my little finger in order to receive the instant reassurance from my audience that everything I do is meaningful. Here not a single gesture of mine is wasted (120).

Spiess quickly becomes enamoured of himself in Hangzhou, believing that 'a theatre, a storyteller and an audience are all that is required for the fulfilment of every human desire' (121). He believes himself to be the playwright in his imaginary landscape, a belief which is realised in the knowledge that not 'a single gesture is wasted'.

His comfort in this world leads Spiess to undertake an excursion into the countryside, 'fearing his departure for Shanghai could not be delayed much longer' (126). His 'head full of visions [and] a blind enthusiasm grip[ping] him' (129), Spiess is surprised to be set upon by a group of assailants. Thinking they have mistaken him for 'one of their unscrupulous landlords', and that 'they will realise their mistake in a moment', Spiess tries to rise 'in order to reveal their error to them'. It is then he sees 'in their eyes ... a terror in what they were doing' (131), and realises there is no substance to his belief in mistaken identity. Only the arrival of Madame Feng that makes the attackers 'drop their sticks and thrust themselves through the cordon of onlookers' (132). Lien is adamant: 'they would have killed you within a few more minutes, I assure you, if I had not arrived' (133).

The desire of Spiess to retain the dreamland as his own is evident in his naive comment about the incident: 'it is as well that no real harm has come of it' (134). This causes Lien to loose a personal diatribe against the obstetrician.

You have been in China twenty years and you have understood nothing yet, Doctor Spiess! Your stupidity has already made inevitable the deaths of those who took advantage today of the opportunity you gave them to attack you. *No real harm has been done!* Will you attend the executions of these wretched

people? Will you? Will you let them know you hate them as implacably as they hate you? Will you grant them this assurance, that they are dying for a reason and have been defeated by a real enemy? (135).

Far from being an exalted 'god' or 'king' of the theatrical landscape in Hangzhou, August is forced to realise that he was an unexalted intruder. The attention given him is emblematic not of a loving fascination, but of a deep-seated hatred. He is only 'an exotic acquisition from the strange land of Shanghai, which ... they think of here as the centre of Western Christendom, that is to say the place where the devils live' (123).

In his preoccupation with his own sense of dislocation, Spiess is blind to the pride and community that derives from monolithic myths of ancestry, where 'possession of ancestral links to the land confers ... special privileges' (283). He had envisaged extraterritoriality as 'a civilisation that floated in a kind of detached emotional zeal'. It promised a life 'outside history. Each one of us an actor who wrote his or her own lines as the play progressed' (269). In reality, however, China has too much history to be a land of the imagination.

Lien encapsulates the Chinese viewpoint: 'Extraterritoriality? Why invent such an idea for the occupation of a country?' (135-6). From Lien's perspective, military conquest:

is the traditional and only honourable means by which a proud and ancient nation might seek to achieve ascendancy over its neighbours (203).

Lien's derisive tone issues from her conviction that extraterritoriality has usurped China of its primacy, and subjected it to an occupation that is devoid of dignity or honour. Although from a Western perspective extraterritoriality constitutes not so much an 'occupation' of China as a 'paternal' residency, after being attacked at Fenghuang Hill Spiess is forced to conclude that even the extraterritorials 'were a part of the tragic history of China' (269).

The doctor finally realises that:

the Han only labour impatiently beyond the boundaries of the International Settlement for the day when they will expel the foreign devils from their native soil and reimpose the hegemony of their own fiat (283).

By implication, then, those who feel excluded or displaced must discard these ties and create a new homeland, a need that Spiess later suggests to Lang has been characteristic of humanity from time immemorial. 'The

ancients quarrelled with their fathers, too, and left home and founded nations. What has changed?' (259). The doctor goes on further to say:

in Australia, which is I believe a kind of phantom country lying invisibly somewhere between the East and the West, you may find a few of your own displaced and hybrid kin to welcome you (260).

In this phantom country, in an indeterminate location between East and West, both Lang and Spiess are hopeful of reconciling themselves with those who share their condition of displacement.

Certainly August Spiess writes that in Australia he has found 'the land in between'.

I am in the secret place I once knew in my imagination. There is no nostalgia in what I feel. It is not a European city. For where is the grand public architecture memorialising mighty regimes ... the conquerors and princes from whose ambitious struggles this State was fashioned? These folk reside beyond the reach of history. Here extraterritoriality is the status quo (283).

Unlike China, Australia is infantile in its form, and characteristic of its conventionalist nature is a 'community engendered domestically' (284). Apparently ignoring the aboriginal population that preceeded the European and Asian immigrants, Spiess concludes that 'if there were to be a revolution in Australia there would be nothing for the people to tear down, for they have put it all up themselves' (283). The freedom of self-direction is an unexceptional norm here, and this freedom is only to be 'judged for oneself and not for one's tribe' (227).

This is the kind of community in which Lang and Spiess can engender a personal sense of identity and place. Miller does note, however, that customary and conventionalist values-systems do exist in a state of simultaneity. The great grandfather of Lang, Feng One, perceived this dynamic in the Australian outback in the middle of the nineteenth century.

He had closed his eyes and a catalyst had been slipped into the mix of their new society and had caused this group of men to separate out and to form a single body united by a common identity and a common purpose. While he'd slept something had awoken in these mounted men the knowledge that they were of the same tribe ... had stirred within them the latent memory of ancestral bonds, and, in becoming the familiars of each other, they had become strangers to him (225).

Freedom lies only in dispossession and displacement, and there is always the potential for latent memories of common ancestral bonds to be stirred. These memories, Miller suggests, are prompted by insecurity or crisis, the need to ward off 'uncertainty and ... paranoia [and] to draw more closely together to find comfort and support in each other' (229). The Australian community, with the exception of isolated incidents such as Feng observed, has never entertained such uncertainty, and has therefore created itself without recourse to ancestral imperative.

It is a country that has not experienced violent internal upheaval and has not been fashioned by tyranny. It therefore evades the colonising force of monolithic myth that consolidates triumphant regimes. Primacy in any form, with its inherent polarities of inclusion and exclusion, is unwelcome in Australia. Spiess talks of the Halloran family who are distant relatives of Lang Tzu:

[i]n [Mrs Halloran's] oral book of the ancestors the concealed argument had concerned the question not of the primacy of either the male or female line, but the legitimacy of descent. It had concerned what had *befallen*. Kinship, no matter how extenuated, was the singular quality that could not at last be resisted (280).

The tension created by notions of primacy and exclusion in the Chinese world of Huang and Lien is absent in the eclectic Australian world of the Hallorans'. The latter society depends for its cohesion 'not upon ancestral bonds, but on the principle that all persons are born free and equal before God' (227).

This is not to assert, however, that myth has become redundant in the new society of Australia. Given that myth embodies the aspirations, ideals and beliefs of a society, myth still exists even if in a modified form. A connection can be made, for example, between Huang's book of the ancestors and Mrs Halloran's oral book of the ancestors. Huang's *churinga* as a symbol of myth is a legitimisation of his primacy to the land, vocation, and role in a long established community. It gains in strength from the quality of exclusion, demanding a personal commitment to communal values and traditions, citing expulsion as a punishment for non-adherence. Exclusion and primacy are fused in the issue of gender: in its obstinate reinforcement of the primacy of the male line, it silences the female voice.

Mrs Halloran's oral history of ancestry has marked parallels with Huang's *churinga*, being 'a thing sacred and extensive and complex and

Biblical and reaching into the archaic origins and virtues of the Hallorans' Australian genesis' (278). It is an oral tradition with 'stories of romantic interludes and tragedies of brave deeds', but it is still 'quite as exacting in its rigour as the literary tradition of China'. Furthermore, it reflects the conventionalist composition and values of Mrs Halloran's society. In marked contrast to China's myth of ancestry, this is a far more diverse composition and a more liberal set of values. Firstly, it lies in the memory of a woman, and the stories concern 'who begat whom and where and in what circumstances of ease or deserving need these consecrated couplings and joinings and procreations took place' (279). It is of no consequence whether Lang's connection with the Halloran's derives from the male or female line, or whether he has shunned tradition or community in coming to Australia.

This freedom of self-creation and self-assertion is the inalienable right of every citizen.

The speech and gestures of these people are without a care for the censure of any person. They do not confer closely and in whispers, but shout their opinions for all to hear. They do not watch their fellow citizens in case they are betrayed, for there is no one to whom their fellow citizens might betray them if they wished to do so (283).

While this freedom exists as a right, the right must still be claimed. The text reminds us that the 'essence of freedom is in dislocation from one's origins' (227), and dislocation requires that the individual resolve the tension between the influence of ancestry and the need for a unique identity. Interrogating this tension, *The Ancestor Game* suggests, is the groundwork for personal myth.

The most compact example of the annulment of a lingering ancestral force are the journals of August Spiess. Stephen is convinced that he has been presented by Gertrude with the authentic journals of her father August Spiess 'as a source for [his] own work' (298). Puzzling over the fact that throughout the seven volumes of handwritten manuscript there is not one mistake or revision in the margin, however, Stephen concludes that the text:

is clearly not a first draft but a painstakingly crafted transcription of a highly finished translation. These books are not the product merely of a dutiful impulse. There is a larger and more considered purpose than that in their creation (297).

Considering this larger purpose at length, Stephen finds himself questioning the presence of fiction in history and the alchemy of personal mythmaking.

How could he have been so certain he would never revisit Hamburg, the place of his origin? Had he really *been* that certain. To what degree had hindsight led her to modify her father's thoughts? Could she, indeed, have resisted tampering with them, still loving him, grieving for the loss of him? (298)

Stephen's re-examination of the text with these thoughts in mind leads him increasingly toward the conviction that, 'in these books Gertrude had embarked on a fictionalisation of her father' (298-9).

He suspects that although it may not have been Gertrude's initial intention, that with the 'smoothing out a difficulty or making an image turn more surely ... and with several painstaking drafts', she infiltrated the text and claimed it as her own.

By this process, little by little and with subtlety, replacing the presence of her father in the work with the presence of herself; accomplishing a reverse colonisation to the one with which the chanting spectre of my own dead father had threatened me; the living child, in her case, fittingly taking up and renaming the spaces of the dead parent; making herself at home while making of herself an artist (299).

The empowering aspect of the process is the reverse colonisation of an almost overwhelming ancestry. Here past and present are fused, in a sense, by an inter-generational flow of the forces that reshape 'features we had thought to be permanent, [that move] what we had thought to be stilled forever, and [that wear] away resolves in us not even touched by our strangest imaginings' (44).

This reciprocal flow creates a comfortable environment which is ultimately fashioned by the subject for him or herself. In 'renaming the spaces' of her dead father, Gertrude defeats the uncertainty of motive. Like August, Gertrude has 'discovered motives, my own and everybody else's, to be impenetrable' (264). She transcends this uncertainty, however, through a self-liberating project: making herself a myth of ancestry and homeland *by* making of herself an artist.

Monolithic myths of ancestry, Miller asserts, are the barrier to this self-determination of place and identity. They are deficient in their innate privileging and repression, yet remain a constituent influence on the individual. Only in dislocation from, and dispossession of ancestry,

can the subject find the freedom to annul these ancestral influences through fiction.

The community, of course, should reflect the unique values and needs of the displaced. Gertrude's observation that for certain people exile is the only tolerable condition is thrown into sharper focus. Exile is displacement with the *dream* of return: the individual grounded in a reality with imaginings of a past. Exile is the freedom for the imagination to create a home. Stephen finally comprehends this in the last lines of the novel, finding a place for himself in an epiphanic vision.

They are examining the uninhabited tryptich before them: a divided landscape waiting to be inhabited, the principle characters withheld by her until this moment (302).

Conclusion.

The Satanic Verses, *The English Patient*, and *The Ancestor Game* all have their genesis in the theme of transition. It is trite but nonetheless true to say that the world has developed rapidly over the last fifty years, and is now caught in the flux of what has been labelled the post-modern age. The most significant aspect of what we call this age, from the post-colonial perspective of Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller, is that brisk economic and technological advances have given rise to unprecedented levels of travel. Expatriate and migrant populations are a common feature of most developed nations, lending a cosmopolitan atmosphere to their adopted society.

Such human displacement brings a unique set of challenges to both the community and the individual. How does a dynamic community achieve a sense of unity? How can the dislocated individual constitute a sense of identity or place? How can one's past be reconciled with one's present?

These anxieties are salved by the inflexible structure of a traditional, or customary community. This community imagines itself to be a natural grouping, bonded by a kinship that derives from a logic of shared descent. Implicit in the notion of kinship are pre-fabricated ideas of identity and place for the individual. The vertical axis of descent also forms the basis of a politics of exclusion, which protects the community from contamination by external influences and reinforces feelings of belonging and unity.

It is typically myth that writes the collective drama of the group, and monolithic myth that serves to guarantee the naturalness and concrete values of this customary community. Monolithic myth denotes an extreme, self-sufficient myth-system that demands unswerving belief from its adherents. Although it is artifact, the myth-system has an air of naturalness and is uncritically accepted. Consistent with the communities it underwrites, monolithic myth speaks directly to collective and individual notions of identity and place.

Monolithic myth also incorporates a politics of exclusion that can create the Other as an image of enmity; and, equally, it can be repressive in its privileging of the desire for communal good or

stability over the desire of the individual for self-determination. Monolithic myth is not a function of traditional or modern societies but of those in between: those displaced, those resenting a present foisted on them, and hence reinventing the past in a pure image.

It is because of the repressive and exclusive characteristics of monolithic myth that it is so vigorously contested by Rushdie, Miller and Ondaatje. As migrants themselves, they see eclecticism as the only desirable basis for a hybridised community. They recognise that while cultural miscegenation and hybridity are defining characteristics of contemporary western society, the intolerant values of customary society still have considerable purchase within them. Indeed, with a surfeit of conflicting messages creating an increasingly complex society, the dichotomised clarity and unequivocal certainty of monolithic myth can appear all the more attractive.

Writing from a post-colonial viewpoint, the three authors considered in this thesis all contest the monolithic myths that they perceive to be impermeable barriers to cultural integration. Rushdie's focus was directed at religious myth through the experiences of Gibreel Farishta, and mythical cultural archetypes through the experiences of Saladin Chamcha. The two characters begin with these beliefs as monolithic myths, and both have them shattered. Rushdie maintains, however, that disbelief itself is too absolute to be sustained in an age where doubt or uncertainty are the defining characteristics. Doubt precludes the comfort of the monolithic, and to deny this is to suffer the miserable fate of Gibreel. Only Saladin recognises that doubt is the catalyst for a more provisional, eclectic form of myth, devoid of the repression and destruction of the monolithic order.

In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje places these same destructive and repressive characteristics under intense scrutiny. He argues that although the idea of nation is artifact, it is mostly uncritically accepted, and becomes so reified in times of crisis as to render it a monolithic myth. Problematically, because nation is historically determined and informed by agenda and ideology, it becomes a lever for those who wield power in the national community. Ondaatje suggests that a sense of obligation to such a construct is, therefore, misplaced. For him, the greater good on which the nation-myth is predicated is a lie: it forces a communal paradigm on the individual and forecloses on self-determination.

The loss of self-determination within a communal paradigm is an issue that also deeply concerns Alex Miller. In *The Ancestor Game* he suggests how monolithic myth underpins customary communities, creating them as intolerant and repressive. The myth of ancestry in Chinese society has a rigid patriarchal structure which implicitly guarantees notions of identity and place within the community. This guarantee, however, is presupposed by a blanket conformity. That is to say, the ancestral myth that shores up Chinese communities legislates the individual's behaviour so completely, that it denies a visceral, self-determined response to any given situation. Put simply, it fails through intolerance to allow for human difference and the need for change.

These concepts of difference and change are particularly important to Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller. As post-colonial authors they are concerned with issues of cultural survival, and recognise that tolerance is the touchstone for the acceptance and celebration of difference. This anxiety about the erasure of difference manifests itself in the issues of identity and place.

The treatment of identity by Rushdie and Miller shows marked similarities. While both suggest that the past, and especially one's ancestral past, can be a colonising force threatening the self-determination of the individual, they also assert that the past cannot be denied in the constitution of identity. Saladin Chamcha, for example, seeks refuge in Britain from the spectre of his father, only to be lured home by the prospect of Changez's death and the promise of forgiveness. Significantly, in all his time in London trying to deny his Indianness, Saladin never quite succeeds in removing the influence of the sub-continent from himself.

Miller's character Stephen Muir, too, feels himself threatened by infection from the beliefs and mannerisms of his father. In researching the history of his friend Lang Tzu, Stephen finds that his is a shared experience. Although Lang, Gertrude, and Victoria have all been noticeably shaped by ancestral legacy, *The Ancestor Game* asserts that it forms a constituent part of any individual's identity and sense of place. For both Rushdie and Miller there is the conviction that '*every moment that has ever been continues to exist somewhere, enriched by subsequent events*' (TAG, p238).

A significant barrier to this creation of self issues from the politics of exclusion that forms an important part of monolithic myth.

Each of the three writers have examined the theme of discrimination and its ramifications. *The Satanic Verses* portrays racism, for instance, as an insidious force in English society which is masked by a purported eclecticism. Thus Saladin has difficulty reconciling the English society he had thrived in as an advertising voiceover specialist with the prejudiced English society he encounters as a nameless 'illegal' immigrant. Despite the appearance of a hybridised culture where anyone can claim a sense of place, England is indicted by Rushdie as riven with a logic which casts its immigrants as unwelcome outsiders.

Unsurprisingly for Saladin, it is his sudden awareness of this prejudice that leads him to re-embrace his Indianness. He finally loses faith in the existence of the mythical English archetype, rejecting the actuality of the absolute. Saladin's disbelief is initially contrasted with Gibreel's doubt. In Rushdie's view, doubt is sufficient to exclude the individual from a monolithic myth, while disbelief is too final, becoming in itself a totalising proposition. Gibreel is unable to live with his doubt or, by extension, to secure a place or identity in any absolute form: God or Allie, spiritual or secular. Finally, he is driven to suicide by the satanic verses of his mind. Of the two, only Saladin proves himself capable of living with doubt and contingency through his creation of a provisional and tolerant sense of self and place. He rejects any politics of exclusion by conflating the binary equations of past/future East/West, finally viewing his life as '*the first instant of the future and the present moment of the past*' (TSV, p535).

Miller sees exclusion as a deficiency within the myth of ancestry. Lang feels excluded and displaced because he is the son of Feng, and Feng represents 'the evil thing: foreignness, Abroad, the alien nation' (TSV, p259). Lang is unable to create a place for himself in China, because the foreignness that he embodies is forcibly resisted by the Han. Theirs is a customary society that has its grounding in concepts of possession of, and links to, the land. This is only guaranteed by a direct line of ancestry, and those individuals who fall outside this strict parameter - whether by mixed birth, being orphaned, or foreignness - are excluded from the myth-system. Repeated colonisation and military occupation, then, fail to destroy this sense of origin; the conviction that, 'China will defeat her enemies. One day the old values will be restored' (TAG, p273).

This community is defined by intolerance and a need to exclude by creating images of enmity. Such a community, Miller insists, thwarts the self-determined efforts of the individual to create a sense of self and place. It shuns difference and fails to allow for the uniqueness of the individual. Miller perceives a need for a new mix of community, where those who feel displaced or excluded, whether by fact of birth or a desire for self-actualisation, can constitute a sense of self and place.

Ondaatje corroborates this call for a new mix of community in *The English Patient*. In breaking down a monolithic myth, Ondaatje is more interested in how people relate to each other, than how they create an individual sense of identity and place. As I have suggested, when the nation acts as a monolithic myth it denies self-determination by inviting the individual to join a larger order of community. Like Rushdie with *Saladin*, Ondaatje illustrates a politics of exclusion through the experiences of Kip. Although fighting for the English cause in World War II, Kip finds himself marginalised by virtue of race. Far from the horizontal comradeship he expected to find in the concept of commonwealth, Kip realises that this construct is in fact a sub-imperial structure that privileges the motherland England.

Nation thus constructs a network of obligations that form an artificial barrier to the exchange of the common verities of human existence. Ondaatje, like Miller, believes in a shared essential humanity: the occidental and oriental worlds are one in this, as they were once together in most things. So, nothing is discrete. It's all linked if one bothers to look closely enough' (*TAG*, p259). *The English Patient* asks the question why, if the nation is ideologically informed, should it be a transcendental signifier that humanity is willing to kill and die for?

To assert difference, however, is not to entirely deny communality that cuts across cultural boundaries. Ondaatje's central characters are diverse in nationality, age and experience, yet all share some form of betrayal that springs from the nation's ultimate imperative: war. The feelings of betrayal breed distrust, and Caravaggio, Hana, Kip and Almásy have all developed an organic sufficiency that enables them to cope with the pain they are suffering. Their self-alienation and atomisation is born of a common human will for survival.

The microcosm of the Villa, however, functions as an exemplar of how the barriers of nation, race and culture can be collapsed. The

friendships between the four are tentative but tangible. While Ondaatje suggests that to be beholden to a monolithic myth of nation is destructive, this cannot equate with a wholesale dismissal of obligation. Rather, it signals there is a need to be obligated, but at a deep personal level without the mitigating influence of an artifact like nation. For without an ability to undertake commitment one is painfully isolated. This is Almásy's lesson: self-sufficiency is the risk of having 'everything [one] ever loved or valued ... taken away' (*TEP*, 257).

Ondaatje pointedly refuses to provide a solution to the problems he raises. Indeed, the fragile nature of the emotional reconstruction that occurs at the Villa is exposed by Kip's abandonment of his friends after the news of Hiroshima. The final chapter of the novel, however, gives cause for optimism. Far from being able to erase the memory of Hana, Kip 'urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were most intimate at in the tent' (*TEP*, p301). She appears to him in moments of revelation, conveyed from her country to his, and mirrored through Kirpal's young daughter. In the conflation of culture symbolised by Hana's reflection in Kip's daughter, there is a suggestion of an innate potential for harmony in the world. This only exists, though, in a fundamental human economy beyond the pale of monolithic myth.

Rushdie and Miller, too, exhibit a diagnostic approach to issues in *The Satanic Verses* and *The Ancestor Game*. They recognise a need for myth as an ordering device for humankind, but indict a monolithic form as too intolerant and destructive to have real efficacy as a charter for existence. Myth must be both provisional and self-determined, and a celebration of *all* constituent influences: Saladin Chamcha rather than Gibreel Farishta. Although identity and place are the result of mental process, they are not created in a vacuum but in a physical environment. This environment, Rushdie and Miller maintain, must encourage the formation of such hybridised concepts. Thus for Miller, the construction of identity and place is tantamount to artistic endeavour: the individual the poet, the community the muse.

The combined vision of all three authors is a new appreciation of the tension between difference and similarity. Challenging the reductive and destructive intolerance of monolithic myth, their novels articulate a plea for eclecticism. Similarity for humankind not in a monolithic myth-system, but in a shared sense of humanity. To reflect this,

community should be rejuvenated, not debilitated, by cultural specificity and difference. *The Satanic Verses*, *The English Patient*, and *The Ancestor Game* are thus a re-negotiation of power within community. In this theatre of exchange, where the monolithic threatens the eclectic, the texts of Rushdie, Ondaatje and Miller are the keystones of a post-colonial stance located far beyond the post-modern.

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